The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady
7
Piero Karasu
Illustration by
Yuri Kisaragi

Euphyllia Fez Palettia
Daughter of Duke Magenta.
Became queen for Anisphia's sake.
Anisphia Wynn Palettia
First Princess of the Kingdom
of Palettia. Yearns for magic and
continues to pursue her research.
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The Magical Revolution
of the Reincarnated Princess
and the Genius Young Lady

"I'm taking you to the bedroom, Anis."
"E-Euphie?! You're seriously going to carry me up there?!"
Only then did I realize she had lifted me into the air.
As if gravity had no sway over her, she took off into the sky with a light step. With her dazzling flying magic, she leaped all the way up to the window and straight into the room.
It took all I had just to sit there in wide-eyed astonishment.

"...I wonder what the view from up here will be like when it's finished."
"I can't wait to see it, Anis."
Standing side by side, we stared out at the yet-to-be-completed city, the stars twinkling beautifully overhead.

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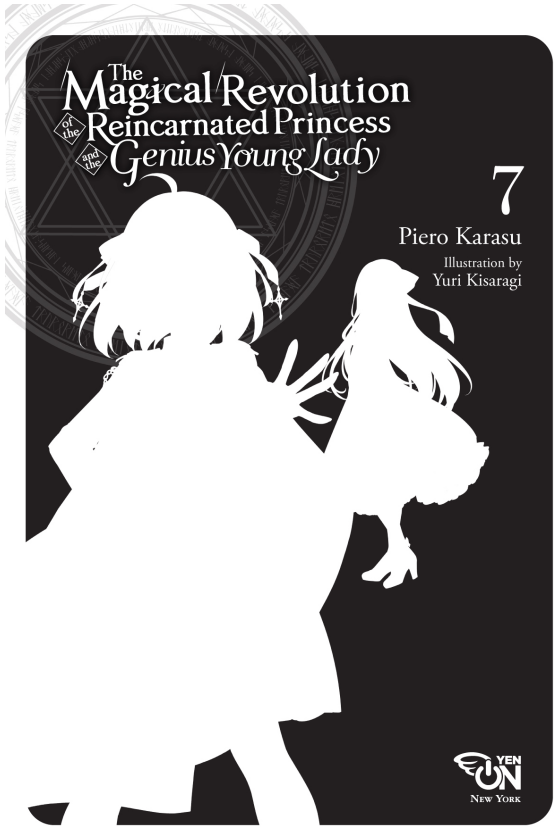
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Piero Karasu

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The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady 7

The Story So Far

Princess Anisphia yearns for magic and yet cannot use it. After she rescues the gifted prodigy Euphyllia from the commotion of her annulled betrothal, the two young ladies set out on new beginnings. With Euphyllia having acceded to the throne as queen, Anis is free to focus on her research. Now that she has absorbed the dragon magicite, the question of Anis's limited life span is resolved, and our heroines can start focusing on their "magical revolution" in earnest.

Characters

Ilia Coral
Anisphia's personal maid.

Lainie Cyan
Was at the heart of the incident in which Euphyllia's betrothal was called off. In reality a vampire, and now a maid at the detached palace.

Algard Von Palettia
Anis's brother. Presently exiled to the frontier.

Acryl
A Lycant who wandered into Algard's frontier territory .

Tilty Claret
Daughter of a marquis, and a researcher of curses.

Gark Lampe
One of Anis's research assistants. An apprentice at the Royal Guard.

Navre Sprout
Son of the commander of the Royal Guard. Currently serving as Anis's bodyguard.

Halphys Nebels
Young lady who excels at magic research.
One of Anis's research assistants.

The Story So Far

Piero Karasu
Illustration by Yuri Kisaragi

With the chilly rainy season behind us, the mornings were starting to warm up.

Feeling an altogether different kind of warmth, I relaxed my cheeks.

"…This is unusual. Looks like I woke up first today, Euphie."

Still slumbering soundly beside me was the person who mattered most to me in the whole world—Euphyllia Fez Palettia.

I stared at my beloved's sleeping face, and that alone was enough to inspire a fresh wellspring of affection deep in my chest.

She clung to my arm, so I reached out with the other, brushing her hair away from her face. She let out a soft moan at the small touch but showed no sign of waking up.

"Upper Light isn't too far off, so you'll have to start getting up on time, you know?"

The month of Upper Light was one of the most important in the calendar of the Kingdom of Palettia, heralding the beginning of the new year. Nobles who had returned to their own territories during the rainy season would make their way back to the royal capital for it, and Euphie would be kept busy with her official duties as queen.

Truthfully, I wanted nothing more than to pamper my hardworking darling to my heart's content. Considering our respective social positions, however, life wasn't quite so easy.

"I've got to spoil you as much as I can before then…"

It was incumbent on any member of the royal family to always be aware of how they were viewed by others and to conduct themselves accordingly. For the longest time, I had abandoned that responsibility, but now that I had taken it on once again, I felt almost suffocated under its oppressive weight.

"There's still some time before we have to get up, so I might as well let her sleep a bit longer…," I murmured under my breath.

"…Then can I occupy some of your time?"

I wasn't expecting that response. Euphie, not as asleep as I had assumed, slowly opened her eyes to stare back at me with a languid look.

“Ah, sorry. Did I wake you, Euphie?”

“No, it’s okay. In any event, it’s time to get up…”

“You can take it a little slower, you know?”

“Of course. Which is why I wanted to take some of *your* time.”

Still watching me with sleepy eyes, Euphie reached out to touch my neck. We were so close that we could bask in each other’s body heat, and we remained that way for a short while.

I was happy just with that physical contact, but Euphie slowly pulled away, fixing me with a mischievous smile. I decided to lean in for a kiss, when—

“Good morning, Queen Euphyllia! Good morning, Princess Anisphia! May I come inside?” A brisk knock was followed by an energetic greeting.

Euphie placed a devilish finger on my lips, preventing me from getting any closer. “Next time.”

“Ugh, where did the time go?! I woke up early and everything…”

“Well, shall we get up? We have another busy day ahead of us, Anis.”

“…Yeah. Let’s give it our all, Euphie.”

We exchanged just the one kiss—barely a touch—as we pressed our foreheads together lightly before rising to our feet.

“Good morning, Charnée,” I answered. “You can come in!”

“Excuse me!” she called from behind the door, and a cheerful girl in a maid uniform stepped inside.

Upon learning that we were looking to employ more staff, Charnée, from the Persimmon family, whose territory we had visited a while back, had volunteered to leave her home and join us at the detached palace.

We were already familiar with each other, we got along well, and Charnée was naturally hardworking and diligent, so Ilia had assigned her as my personal maid. I couldn’t be more grateful.

“Good morning, Charnée. You seem as lively as ever,” Euphie said.

“Yes! That’s my forte, Your Majesty! Your clothes are ready whenever you are!”

“Then I’ll go get changed. See you later, Anis,” Euphie said with a light wave as she slipped on a gown and left the room.

“Bye, Euphie,” I called after her.

Charnée offered Euphie a polite bow, then jolted upright like a

spring-loaded doll. It was so comical that I almost burst out in laughter.

"Now then, Princess Anisphia! Let's get you ready, shall we?"

"Of course. Thanks again."

"Leave it to me! I'm confident I'll meet Lady Ilia's every expectation!"

Watching Charnée enthusiastically set about her duties, I could tell she was in higher spirits now that her family estate was faring better. It was a wonderful transformation to see firsthand.

While she helped me get dressed, I counted the days since she had started working here.

"It's been what, six months since you came to the detached palace, Charnée?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right!"

"You didn't go home during the rainy season, did you? Is everything all right back there?"

"I've only just started working here, so it's too early to take a vacation! And don't you worry about my family, Lady Anisphia! Thanks to Queen Euphyllia's support, things are picking up—and of course, that's also thanks to you! You defeated that Fenrir before it could do any major damage!"

"You don't need to praise me like that… So your father is hard at work, I take it?"

Viscount Persimmon's holdings had been so heavily ravaged by monster attacks that he had even considered relinquishing his noble title. Given the value of his territories to the kingdom, Euphie had decided to aid in their recovery.

The Kingdom of Palettia was presently in the middle of a great transformation.

For the dissemination of the fruits of my magicology research, we would require a much larger volume of spirit resources than the realm had access to until now.

As such, it would have been unthinkable to let Viscount Persimmon's rich and untapped territory continue to fall into decay.

On top of that, the viscount himself was of reputable character, and I wanted to believe in his commitment and dedication.

Because of all this, I allowed myself to settle in my present position and take on Charnée as my attendant. Given her unfailing work ethic, I considered myself fortunate.

"The first item on your agenda today, Your Highness, is a consultation with Lady Tilty just before noon," she explained.

"Ah, right. An examination…," I said with a sigh.

"Yes. Then, as per usual, you will meet everyone in the laboratory this afternoon."

"I suppose we ought to get moving, then. Could you ask the staff to prepare lunch for Tilty as well? She'll want to take part in the afternoon meeting."

"Understood. I'll let them know!"

Talking with Charnée had a peculiar way of lifting my spirits. She was grateful to us, of course, but I think Ilia's recommendation came more from her good-natured personality.

"I'll have to keep working hard, too," I whispered.

Yes, it was the start of a new day.

* * *

"How are you feeling, Anis?"

"Good, good. I'm in great health!"

"I see. That's a shame."

"Hey, come on, now!"

Shortly after breakfast, Tilty arrived at the detached palace, came into my room, and said terrible things by way of greeting. Really, the years hadn't changed her one little bit, and her

eccentricities stood out even stronger now that I was spending more time with decent people like Charnée.

"I'm glad to hear *you* aren't having any problems…but that poses a problem for *me*," Tilty continued. "It's no fun observing someone who never changes… In fact, it's disconcerting."

"You can just say it. I'm boring now," I shot back.

"That's certainly the word for it. So no obvious, impossible-to-ignore changes? Maybe something like a royal princess morphing into a dragon?"

"I told you, I'm still human! All I did was absorb the dragon's powers!" I said half-jokingly.

"…I *am* seriously worried about that, you know?" Tilty responded with a stern look.

She was right; now wasn't the time for jokes. As gruff as Tilty was, I was in the wrong here, so I apologized.

"It's been a full year since that vampire incident with Lilana," she continued, "but you're still humanlike. Sure, I know you can change your nails into claws and your teeth into fangs, but you're sure you can't grow a tail or wings or anything else?"

"What am I supposed to make of that question from someone who just said she's worried about me?"

"It was merely a question."

"What do you *want* me to be, Tilty?" I asked.

"I don't want you to be anything. I'm just concerned, seeing as I'm looking at someone who *didn't* turn into a vampire after a bite. Is that normal?"

That incident resulted from a magic user who transformed himself into a monster with the help of taboo powers, thus becoming the very first vampire in the distant past. Given the overwhelming ferocity of vampires, they were thought to have been eradicated long ago. Unknown to history, though, some had survived the attempts to wipe them out, and they covertly grew in number while masquerading as a neighboring country shrouded in secrecy.

During that time, they continued their pursuit of the fundamental truth underlying all magic—and plotted revenge against the Kingdom of Palettia for casting them out.

Eventually, the birth of an irregular vampire, the worst possible heretic, was the beginning of the end for their kind.

That girl—Lilana—sealed the fate of all vampires.

She was an exceptional vampire, and Lilana concluded that her mission was to create an eternal world by assimilating all life and bringing it under her control.

…I can still remember her face like it was yesterday.

Even a year later, I often looked back on our encounter. After all, she had been the living embodiment of what I very well might have become—a monster unable to share her ideals with anyone, fixated on her belief that magic was a wonderful gift, pursuing that goal with no regard for who she hurt in the process.

We understood each other so well—yet in the end, we couldn't see eye to eye.

She was a monster in every sense of the word, yet she possessed a humanity not too different from mine. I couldn't possibly forget her.

During our fraught battle, I had fully absorbed the dragon's powers in an effort to counter the hold of the strongest of all vampires. As a result, the dragon magicite had coalesced inside my body, turning me into a being that was both human and dragon.

Tilty was monitoring me carefully so as not to overlook even the most minute of changes, but if you asked me, this was more a hobby than a job to her.

"It's been quiet this past year, and I've been good. No doubt that's why not much has changed," I pointed out.

"But that doesn't mean there have been *zero* changes, no?" Tilty answered. "Well, some of these circumstances were of the vampire kind, so at least Lainie's records came in handy."

"The difference is I don't just want magical energy—I want magicite, too. Maybe that means my body is more akin to a monster's now?"

After all, monsters preyed on each other to absorb their magicite and grow in strength and power.

The same impulse had started to feel almost instinctive for me. It wasn't like I couldn't control it, but if I suppressed it for too long, I would be struck by a gnawing hunger.

On top of that, the urge to use my dragon magic through my Impressed Seal was likewise growing stronger. It was unsettling, if I was being perfectly honest with myself.

"If we assume that vampire magicite causes vampiric changes to the human body, then it would stand to reason that dragon magicite would trigger dragon-like changes, no?" Tilty pointed out.

“Isn’t that the difference?”

“And it means I’m having to rely on our ether drug again…”

“Aren’t you glad it didn’t get shelved?”

“But Euphie doesn’t like it when she catches me drinking it!”

The ether drug was supposed to be unnecessary after applying the Impressed Seal to my back, but since it was made from crushed magicite, I was taking it to quell my urges. Basically, I was using it as a stabilizer.

But the original effect had been potent, and Euphie still gave me an extremely grumpy scowl each time I took it…

“It isn’t as dangerous as it used to be, though,” Tilty pointed out.

“Exactly.” I nodded. “The other effects aren’t as bad if I take a weaker version to focus on reducing my impulses.”

“In that sense, the fact that there aren’t any significant changes may be a sign of good health. But if you do feel anything out of the ordinary, make sure you tell me right away, okay?”

“I think Euphie would tell you before I got the chance…”

“Oh…? She’s become very protective ever since that encounter of yours, hasn’t she?” Tilty murmured, sounding almost disappointed.

I breathed a quiet sigh. “Things have calmed down a lot, but she would have fallen apart if I had made a wrong move back then. I can see why she’s like this now…”

During my fight with Lilana, I had almost turned into a vampire myself.

I was able to resist it, maintaining my sense of self by drawing on the dragon magicite, but if things had gone wrong, I probably wouldn’t be here today.

There wasn’t just myself to consider, either. Euphie had been confronted with the possibility that I might disappear forever, and that fear had been simply unbearable for her.

Even in the aftermath of the encounter with Lilana, she had been restless for the longest time, constantly having nightmares and going through bouts of emotional instability whenever I left her side.

“She acts so perfect that I often forget, but Euphyllia is a bit younger than I am,” Tilty remarked.

“I never wanted to worry her, you know…,” I pointed out.

“First dragons, then vampires… I, for one, don’t want to see any

more of such dangerous monsters. Either one could have been a national disaster. I'm grateful the past year has been so uneventful."

"Yeah, it really has been peaceful. Especially compared to the one before that…"

"The world didn't stop turning while you were recuperating, Anis," Tilty noted. "Prince Algard, for instance, was awarded his own barony."

At the mention of my brother, I felt conflicted. Just thinking about him was enough to fill me with joy and regret and a whole range of emotions.

"…Everyone thinks Allie was granted his title as a pardon, a way of throwing him a bone after ordering him to develop the frontier. But in truth, it's because we need him to deal with the aftermath of those vampires…"

"Well, the threat they posed to the kingdom is still being kept under wraps."

Indeed, very few individuals knew the truth about Lilana and her vampire clan.

The knights and adventurers who had fought together against them should have been awarded medals and commendations, but as the situation was being withheld from the public, that wasn't possible, either.

Instead, Allie had been awarded his own barony, while the knights and adventurers had been welcomed as his new vassals.

With their unique knowledge and experience facing vampires, they and Allie had quietly been assigned the task of investigating and developing the kingdom's border regions. If they proved themselves worthy, there were plans to issue them other awards down the road.

"If Allie can develop the frontier into a self-sustaining territory, we could use it as a base to scout out and protect any surviving vampires and demi-humans. It would be the perfect place for keeping those secrets hidden."

"Even if you plan to go public at some point, now isn't the right moment… Algard must be having a hard time of it, no?" Tilty commented.

"He said he's used to drawing the short end of the stick, but I think he was being sarcastic. Then again, if not for everything that happened, he wouldn't have his vassals and holdings. I'm not worried, though, seeing as he has Acryl by his side."

“Ah, the Lycant girl. Do you think he’ll marry her someday?”

“It’d be a relief if he did.” I chuckled, imagining a bright future for the both of them.

I, too, had joined the ranks of nonhuman outcasts, so I couldn’t help but wonder about where their relationship was leading.

“If things go well, you mean?” Tilty added. “Because the frontier is just as harsh as it’s ever been.”

“That’s true… They have lots of plants and animals there, so they don’t need to worry about food or anything, but you need more than that to live on.”

“Supplying the frontier is no easy task, I take it?”

“I’ve been thinking if we could make the Airbikes a bit bigger, we might be able to transport supplies by air. But I don’t think we’re quite there yet…”

“Speaking of which, those large-scale repair works should be getting underway soon, no? The city is falling apart. They have to do something to shore it up.”

“Right, right. All under the guise of preserving historical culture.”

“But…we know the *real* goal, yes?”

“…Yeah.” I couldn’t hold back a wry smile. “I always wanted to build an institute for studying magicology even before this plan came up… But it was rejected. I’m sure you know why.”

“The Ministry of the Arcane raised objections, yes? Do they still tremble at the mere sight of you?” Tilty joked.

“You make it sound like I’m some terrible monster.”

Tilty responded with a dismissive snort. “Are you not?”

I gritted my teeth in annoyance, but it was certainly true that my relationship with the Ministry of the Arcane was somewhat fraught.

“I’m fine with the new plan, you know?” I pointed out. “I think it’s a good thing to keep the royal capital the way it is for the sake of cultural preservation. Which is why I’m not pushing for a magicology institute here anymore.”

“How tame of you… You’ve become remarkably diplomatic.”

“Why don’t you just say I’ve grown up?!”

For years, I had been at odds with the Ministry of the Arcane, but the organization had undergone an internal reorganization during my period of rest and recuperation, and now we had successfully made a new start.

We still clashed due to differences in thought and opinion sometimes, but unlike before, we were able to hear each other out and engage in cordial discussion even when we disagreed.

Euphie was on my side, but as queen, it was also her job to unify the nobility, so there were times when she asked me to be patient for a while in the interests of the kingdom as a whole.

Given how antagonistic the ministry had been until just recently, I didn't want to have to wait *too* long, but at least I didn't feel like they were trying to take advantage of me anymore. Or maybe they were just wary about provoking me too much…?

"But are you really okay with it? You say you're on decent terms with the ministry, but you can't deny it looks like an effort to drive you out of the capital." Tilty narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

"It's fine. Euphie approved of the plan, and it's necessary, all things considered," I answered without hesitation.

I had lain low this past year, but that didn't mean affairs weren't moving forward behind the scenes. Although, even I was taken aback when I first heard this proposal.

Tilty breathed a deep sigh as she brushed her hair back with a wave.

"…I never thought they would actually build an entirely new city to research and promote magicology."

CHAPTER 1
Fresh Challenges

We were building a brand-new city for the study of magical science, and this plan had been set in motion around four months after our encounter with Lilana.

That day, Euphie summoned me to the council room at the royal palace to explain it to me.

"A new *city*?" I repeated, staring back at her.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, there have been a great many discussions about it," she continued.

I had attended the meeting on Euphie's request, but I couldn't have been more surprised by what she said next.

"We've reached a consensus, so I thought it would be a good time to bring you in, Anis. I'd like to ask you to lead a new urban development project."

"Er, why me? You want me to build a *city*…?"

I couldn't quite grasp why Euphie wanted to put me in charge of this endeavor.

I mean, she hadn't even told me why she wanted to build a new city in the first place.

"Let me explain," Euphie began, apparently sensing my confusion. "Do you remember the conversation we had about repairing and restoring all the dilapidated buildings in the royal capital?"

"Of course. I suggested setting up an institute for the study of magicology."

"Indeed. That suggestion was rejected on the grounds that priority should be given to preserving the capital's cultural heritage."

"I get that, but how does establishing one research institute turn into building a whole city? Even if setting it up in the capital is a no-go, that doesn't mean you need to build an entire city, right?" I said, trying to laugh it off.

"Indeed, it does not, Princess Anisphia," said an unexpected voice—Lang, the new director of the Ministry of the Arcane.

Lang's influence and authority had been on the rise ever since the success of the spirit substantiation show at my birthday

celebration. He stared at me, nervously pushing up his glasses.

"Oh, Lang. What brings you here…?" I asked.

"May I take it from here, Queen Euphyllia?"

"Go ahead, Lang," Euphie answered.

"This project was initiated after giving careful consideration to the problems that might arise through greater proliferation of magicology."

"Problems…?" I cocked my head to the side.

"I don't mean that in a negative way. It is no exaggeration to say that Your Highness's research activities have led to a great industrial boom throughout the kingdom—for which we're incredibly grateful."

"Thanks…I guess. But what kind of problems are you talking about?"

"One concern is that once magical tools become widely popularized, the price of spirit stones used in their manufacturing may rise substantially."

"I see. Spirit stones have traditionally been used in daily life, with excess stock exported to neighboring lands, so we'll need more of them."

"Yes. I'm sure their value will inflate quite a bit in the near future. It's fortunate that Queen Euphyllia has provided support for increasing resource extraction throughout the kingdom's territories. Thanks to that, we should be able to keep the surge from being too sudden or dramatic, but that still leaves us with the next problem."

"Yet another problem… You mean the scale of future research?"

"Precisely. So long as there are no resource constraints, there is no reason to delay future magicology research. That is, it goes without saying, but if Your Highness would be willing to expand the scale of your research…?"

"Well, um…"

"I expect magicology will advance into the future as we move forward. There is, however, a fear that people in the royal capital may chase after new inventions and forget their traditional spiritualistic beliefs. We need to be prepared for the backlash from those who hold on to their faith."

"And that's why you were against my idea of building a research institute in the capital?"

"I'm afraid so. We greatly appreciate your understanding on the

matter."

Both magicology and the magical tools it had produced were revolutionary in the Kingdom of Palettia.

All I wanted was to create good things, things to improve people's lives—but if people started thinking that *only* new things had any intrinsic worth, there would be an inevitable decline in the existing culture.

With the spread of magical tools that could substitute for traditional magic, those who had benefited most from the old ways would come to resent them. That was unavoidable.

Rapid change had a tendency to cause friction, and in the worst case, that could escalate into another civil war. In order to prevent that, Euphie continued to seek the help of both our fathers to make political adjustments and appease all parties.

As such, while she was promoting magicology, my efforts weren't progressing as much as I would like, out of consideration for the nobility. As disappointed as I was by this, I understood the necessity.

"All that said, our issue is with establishing the magicology institute within the royal capital. There are no objections to expanding the scale of research. As such, we thought it would be prudent to commission a new city to advance your efforts, and Her Majesty expressed her agreement with this line of thinking."

"I agree with Lang's proposal, but what about you, Anis?" Euphie asked.

"I understand the reasoning now, but seriously…? I mean, it would be such a *huge* undertaking…"

I couldn't hide my shock. Yes, I had made the initial suggestion for a real facility to study magicology, and I'd been hoping for approval. But for those who had rejected it to come back with something else on a much larger scale… It was hard to accept so suddenly.

When I hesitated to answer, Lang cleared his throat. "Naturally, we in the Ministry of the Arcane do have our own agenda. There is currently a deep divide between the nobility and the common folk, and we're identifying issues in an effort to bridge that gap. In particular, the slum area at the corner of the capital precincts must be addressed as a matter of considerable urgency."

"Ah, of course… That's true."

I was well aware of the issues in the slums. I had visited often

during my adventurer days.

The people there had nowhere to go to make a living yet had staked everything on reaching the royal capital, hoping to seize opportunity. It would be nice if they had work to sustain themselves, but of course, nothing was that simple.

Some of them enlisted as adventurers because it was the only way to earn a living, only to suffer serious injuries while out on a job. Wounded and ailing, they were unable to find any work at all.

The slums were inhabited chiefly by people who had lost their way. My father had been deeply troubled by their plight, but he had been unable to come up with a concrete solution during his reign.

"We believe that the many demands created by a greater proliferation of magicology will generate opportunities and jobs to improve the situation in the slums," Lang explained.

"So they'll be able to make a living?"

"If the realm lays the groundwork."

"So the idea is to reconstruct all the dilapidated buildings to create jobs?"

"Yes. But in the meantime, those who currently reside in the slums will have nowhere to live. While we could hire some of them to help in other restoration works throughout the capital, we thought it might be worthwhile to consider a larger public works project."

"That's where this idea for a new city came from? It's certainly a bold plan, Lang."

"I'm flattered to hear you say that, Your Highness."

"…Was that a compliment? Or not?" I asked in suspicion.

Euphie, watching this exchange from the sidelines, let out a soft chuckle—though when I shot her a sharp glance, she quickly cleared her throat.

"How about it?" she asked. "Personally, I would like to move forward with this proposal."

"It does sound good, but putting me in charge without any warning…?"

"You will nominally be the project lead, Your Highness, but when it comes to selecting personnel for the work, we will naturally need to consult with Queen Euphyllia," Lang clarified.

"We would like you to manage it, Anis, but your focus should still be on your magicology research," Euphie added.

"So basically, you're just putting my name on it for political

reasons?" I asked.

"It would be more accurate to say you would be delegating to suitable subordinates, Your Highness," Lang said as he adjusted his glasses with one finger.

It looked like he couldn't see my expression very well, perhaps because of the angle of his glasses. I could tell, however, that he was staring at me intently.

"We intend to manage the personnel involved with the new city and other political matters here from the capital. That being said, it would be difficult to grasp what exactly is required without a deep understanding of magicology, which is why we believe you should be in charge, Your Highness. I'm sure there will be a great many opportunities for us to seek your opinion on how the new city should be designed and run."

"Hmm… All right. In that case, I guess I'd be willing to take on the project."

Basically, it sounded like a laboratory on the scale of a city. It stood to reason that it would help both magicology and magical tools to become more widespread, which would in turn attract more people. Those individuals would then collaborate to build out the urban areas, and the management of those would be delegated.

If that was the plan, I ought to be up to the task. But if I was expected to administer the whole city, I didn't see how I could balance that with my actual research.

"Thank you again for your understanding, Your Highness," Lang said with a generous nod. "With that out of the way, I would like to turn to the next topic…"

"Th-there's more?"

"Naturally. There are a great many decisions that need to be made. First of all, if Your Highness agrees to oversee the new city, we would like to consider converting part of the Royal Guard into an independent knightly order for your own exclusive use."

"My own knightly order?!"

"Perhaps *I* should elaborate on that point," Duke Grantz said, taking over for Lang.

I braced myself, worried at how Euphie might react to her father entering the conversation.

Sparks flew whenever these two argued, and the aftermath would be enough to leave me sick to my stomach.

"This new knightly order would serve two roles," Duke Grantz

explained. “The first is to train individuals in the use of magical tools so that they can then teach others—much as Baron Cyan has been doing. The second is to offer you protection, Your Highness, and safeguard your magicology secrets.”

“Meaning they’ll be serving me in a few different ways…”

“Considering your popularity among the commoners and the lower ranks of the nobility, and taking into account the future potential of your magical tools, it seems sensible to recruit volunteers for this order.”

“But if they’re a separate organization, couldn’t that lead to it becoming its own faction or something? That could cause disagreements and friction, don’t you think?”

That was my primary worry after hearing Duke Grantz’s explanation.

Was it a good idea to create rivalries between knightly orders while trying to bridge the long-standing gap between the nobility and the common folk?

“Leave the politics to me, Anis,” Euphie interrupted. “That’s my role. Besides, while public sentiment is changing, there are still a great many people who harbor doubts about magicology and magical tools.”

“Euphie… Are you sure?”

“I do intend to bridge the two emerging factions at some point, but it won’t be a quick change. That’s why I will make sure the political landscape is as smooth as possible. Please, trust me.” As if to say my fears were unfounded, Euphie flashed me a confident smile.

If she was willing to go that far, I couldn’t dig in my heels. I simply had to face this challenge head-on and give it my all.

“All right. If that’s your decision, I’ll go along with this plan for a new knightly order as well. We’ll definitely need more manpower, in any event.”

“We’re considering employing independent knights and adventurers to help construct the new city, and we hope to be ready to start by the beginning of the year,” Euphie said.

“Then shall we discuss the actual location?” Duke Grantz asked nonchalantly.

The moment he came out with this question, I could sense the tension between him and Euphie.

Euphie watched him with a demure smile. It was enough to

leave *me* feeling uneasy, but the duke himself remained unfazed.

The air between them was so electric that the idea of getting near it was terrifying.

"Duke Magenta, I hope it isn't too late to ask Anis's thoughts on a suitable site."

"No, we can discuss this with her. But any further additions should be considered concurrently with the other candidates. Your wise decision to restore order among the nobles has led to some families offering to return their territories to the crown, Queen Euphyllia. As such, it's necessary to take care and coordinate the various estates."

"Um… Does this plan for a new city have something to do with those territories?" I asked.

"It does indeed, Princess Anisphia." The duke nodded.

Once more, I was reminded of how much work Euphie had been doing while I was recuperating from the Lilana incident.

One of the most pressing matters was straightening out the nobility. After all, if the kingdom was to bridge the gulf between the aristocracy and the common folk, the nobility needed to play along.

After a thorough investigation, Euphie's staff had identified several problematic territories. There were those like Viscount Persimmon's, unable to cope due to monster damage or natural disasters, but then there were also those that had suffered under excessive taxation to satisfy their masters' greed.

As a result, several such territories had been relinquished to the crown voluntarily or, in severe cases, confiscated outright.

Since most needed some kind of direct oversight, there were ongoing discussions about whether the crown should manage them directly, integrate them into neighboring territories, or appoint new nobles to serve as local lords.

It all made sense now. The hope was to use one of them as the site of this new city.

"I don't think we need to make the final decision during this meeting, but once full-scale construction gets underway, Princess Anisphia will have to make frequent visits to the site in person," the duke continued. "The sooner we settle on a location, the easier it will be to coordinate and gain the consent of the local lords. I would urge you to decide soon, Queen Euphyllia."

"…Indeed, Duke Magenta. This new city will be crucial to the

realm's future. Given its importance, we will have to decide quickly. Let's await Anis's judgment and select a candidate as soon as possible."

Euphie's face was neutral, but her eyes were steely. Duke Grantz responded with a silent nod.

* * *

"As the project leader, you'll have to oversee the site for the new city in person. I know that… And I know I won't be able to go with you!"

"Yeah, me too…"

"That's the way it is! I have to accept it! He ought to know how I feel, but he's always harping on about something or other. It's like he doesn't even care…!"

"Hey, it's all right. You're doing great, Euphie. Really."

"Pat my head again, please…?"

That evening, Euphie held tight to me, burying her face in my stomach.

She seemed deflated as she cuddled into my embrace—she couldn't have been any more different from the Queen Euphyllia the realm knew.

Serious though the conversation was, I let out a light laugh. Duke Grantz was right—I could see that—but he certainly wasn't one to beat around the bush.

"I'll have to leave the royal capital…," I muttered.

Even saying the words out loud, it still didn't seem real. I had often left the detached palace during my adventurer days, but even then, it was always here for me to return to.

I had always believed that when the time came for me to leave, it would be because I no longer had a place of my own in the kingdom. I never could have dreamed I would have to go to help build a new city.

Perhaps Euphie had overheard me, as she hugged me even tighter. It was starting to get hard to breathe.

"…I don't want you to go," she whispered.

"I know."

"I want you by my side forever. I can't stand to be away from

you, not even for a little while."

She was indulging me, I knew that—but I also knew there was more to it.

Ever since that encounter with Lilana, the shock of almost losing me had left a deep scar on Euphie's heart.

She had developed a certain aloofness ever since becoming a spirit covenantor, but when she was alone with me, she remained the same as ever, letting her adorable childlike side show.

Yes, I had needed the past year to recuperate, but it had also been necessary to help her to regain her peace of mind. I was relieved to see that she was making progress on that front.

Still, it was natural for her to feel anxious at the thought of having to be apart from me. After all, our time together grew shorter by the day.

"…Euphie. Do you want to give up the throne?" I asked as I stroked her head.

She flinched slightly, but she said nothing.

As queen, this was one part of herself that she could never let her subjects see. When she left this room, she would go back to wearing her perfect, selfless mask.

But that was just a facade. Inside hid a brittle, fragile core.

I knew that, at some level. Not even she was perfect. Behind her many accomplishments, she was just a girl.

And yet she had decided to shoulder her heavy fate for me. I had to do something to repay her—but at times, I wished she would simply leave it all behind.

"I'm not relinquishing the throne, Anis," she said at last, raising her face and looking deep into my eyes.

Her expression was serene—nothing like her attitude just a few short moments ago. The little girl with separation anxiety was gone for now.

"Making you give up your dream because of my own selfishness—that would be a death sentence," she continued. "I chose this path to help you, but I'd rather die than hold you back."

"I don't want you to push yourself too hard, Euphie."

"It's only temporary… Right?" she said with a soft smile.

She looked genuinely happy, but at the same time, she seemed on the cusp of breaking down in tears. It was a complicated, ambiguous expression, like a fragile and delicate piece of beautiful glasswork.

“I wonder how long we’ll be able to stand the limelight…,” she murmured under her breath.

I likewise breathed a heavy sigh.

She had put my own thoughts into words. There could be no avoiding the reality looming before us—the question of how much time we had left.

“Eventually, we’ll have to turn over leadership to the next generation. Even if our time in this world is unlike everyone else’s,” Euphie said.

“So this is our time living human lives, huh?”

After all, Euphie was a spirit covenantor, and I had become a dragon.

We had both gained impossibly long life spans, so we would one day have to step back from our current positions.

If we didn’t, we would repeat the tragedy of the spirit covenantors of old—eternal rule and absolute might. We couldn’t let people become too dependent on us.

Eventually, our lives would become decidedly out of sync with those of everyone around us. It was inevitable. But there was something I had to see through before our time was up—the revolution that we had set in motion together.

“I’ll only be queen for a limited time, so I want to do my absolute best. I want to make your dream a reality, Anis. Your support means the world to me. Give me the strength to hold my head up high.”

“I will.”

She caught me in an embrace, unable to contain her boundless affection.

She accepted me wholeheartedly. How many times had I felt blessed to have her in my life like this?

Which was precisely why I wanted to treasure these moments, to cherish them so much that giving them up was incredibly painful.

Euphie, however, hated it when I said things like that. She was always laughing off my compliments. Still, I wanted to ease the burden in some way, which meant that *I* had to keep moving forward, too.

In order to bring our shared dream to fruition, we would both have to shoulder the joys and sorrows together.

I wouldn’t break my promises to her. I did ponder just giving it

all up at times, but those were only momentary lapses.

"Let's give it our all, Euphie."

"Yes. For now, please spoil me some more," she said, hugging me again and burying her face in my stomach. Her breath tickled my skin, almost annoyingly so.

"You've gotten so selfish lately, Euphie… Or were you always like this?"

"Perhaps I learned it from you?"

"Oh?"

We both chuckled, holding each other close and sharing each other's warmth.

If Euphie were to ask what exactly I liked about her, if she wanted to know how deeply I felt about her, my only answer would be *everything*.

I absolutely adored her. There was no other way to feel. There wasn't a single part of her I wasn't impossibly fond of.

"I love you, Euphie."

"I love you, too, Anis."

We were constructing a brand-new city for the study of magicology. Naturally, Halphys, Garkie, and Navre, all of them deeply involved in my research, soon caught wind of the plans.

"A whole new city…? Now that you've explained it, I can see the rationale, but it does come as quite a surprise." Halphys let out an impressed sigh as she adjusted her glasses.

"And breaking off part of the Royal Guard to form an independent order of knights under Lady Anis's control? Now *that's* impressive," Garkie added.

"…I can foresee Princess Anisphia continuing to push me around well into the future," Navre mumbled grimly.

Their reactions were varied, but all three of them were equally taken aback by the news.

"I wanted to hear your thoughts on the plans," I explained. "I've been given a list of possible sites for the new city, but I thought we ought to go over the pros and cons of each of them together."

"This *will* be a challenge…," Halphys murmured with an unreadable look.

"It's never easy picking out pieces of land…" Garkie was equally pensive.

"Yes, I know… Someone else will be in charge of actually administering the city and the surrounding territory, but we can't pick somewhere that's going to make life difficult for them, can we?" I sighed. "I'd like to hear what you think is best."

It was all well and good to delegate tasks to others, but at the same time, I couldn't make decisions without taking their jobs into account.

I had spent a good deal of time during my recuperation studying geography, but I wouldn't be able to oversee the project while I was busy leading our magicology research. There simply wouldn't be enough time in the day.

Navre had been sitting with his chin resting on his hand, deep in thought. "Princess Anisphia," he said. "This city is to be built for the study and dissemination of magicology, correct?"

"Yes, that's right. It will probably become the center of magical

tool research and development, too."

"In that case, I think we can exclude any location that isn't relatively central. If you choose a site in the kingdom's periphery, it will make distribution more difficult."

"…That makes sense. Hopefully that's even an option."

There was no doubt that magicology and magical tools were taking root in the Kingdom of Palettia, and that trend would continue well into the future. There was every possibility that this new city could become a new cultural hub.

It made sense to choose somewhere close to the kingdom's center, if for logistics alone.

"We should also consider whether negotiations with the local nobility can be expected to proceed smoothly," Navre added.

"R-right… To be honest, I think we're going to create some friction no matter what we decide."

"Perhaps so… That just goes to show how much potential influence this research will soon have."

"I'm sure the local nobility will be conflicted. Pleased at the opportunities, but at the same time afraid of them…"

I looked down at the map with the candidate sites marked out, when my eyes caught on one place in particular.

"Come to think of it, it looks like none of these are near rivers."

"Likely because monsters tend to gather around water."

"Water is necessary for survival, though…"

The Kingdom of Palettia was rich in magical and spirit resources. One fortunate consequence of this was the relative ease of securing fresh water. As such, people could live in areas far removed from natural sources.

Most settlements throughout the kingdom weren't located near bodies of water, though. That was unavoidable; over time, it simply became common sense to steer clear of the potential dangers.

There was a large lake adjoining the royal capital, but that was an exception to the rule—it was said to have been formed with magic around the time the kingdom was founded.

Some monsters had taken to roaming the outskirts of the capital, but it was believed that when the city was first established, the terrain had been barren and uninhabited.

The first king, a spirit covenantor, had turned this lifeless place into the capital of a flourishing kingdom—it was truly an amazing feat.

“Ah, I wish we could come up with something everyone would agree to!” I moaned. “But if everyone wanted the same thing, we wouldn’t need to worry about all this!”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out, Lady Anis.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Garkie. You think I’d be this stressed if I had any good ideas?”

“I guess not…but it’s your accomplishments that have silenced your critics thus far.”

“I won’t deny that, but I’ve never been asked to build a whole city…”

“Putting the nobles aside, what kind of city would you like to see, Princess Anisphia?” Halphys asked, intrigued.

I crossed my arms and considered the question.

“My ideal city, huh…? Well, let’s see. First, I would want a big institute for studying magicology. And I’d like to invite lots of craftsmen. It would be nice to have specialists from several different fields so that we can make a variety of tools. And I want a good location to make sure it’s accessible from other places…,” I said, counting my key criteria on my fingers.

My nebulous thought began to take some semblance of a form as I put them into words.

“Also, I’d prefer the location not cause any political headaches…”

“That’s asking too much…,” Navre murmured.

“I know that. I’m just saying…”

“For you to take possession of a territory directly managed by the crown, Princess Anisphia, well… I’m sure people will think they could use that to their own advantage,” Halphys added with a complicated expression as she picked up the documents.

As a national project, the development of magicology was still in its early stages. Regardless of the chosen location, it would inevitably be a blessing to the local nobility and to the common folk alike.

And it was the natural order of things for people to flock to places where they thought they might stand to profit…

“What about the frontier, then?” I suggested.

“That would be out of line with our objectives…,” Halphys noted.

“Right…” I groaned, staring down at the map.

People might not pay it much attention immediately, but

hopefully it would be a major point of interest eventually.

"Commerce is thriving in the western regions, right? How about over there…?" I thought aloud, tracing the map with my finger.

Surprisingly, the roads in the region didn't always follow direct paths from one point of interest to the next. As my finger connected the towns and villages, the path of a potential highway began to stand out.

It was long and winding, though. A flying magical tool would make travel so much easier.

I still thought it had potential. "…Connect them more directly, maybe?"

"…? Is something the matter, Princess Anisphia?"

"Hey, Navre. This place here is under the royal family's direct control, right?" I asked, pointing at one spot on the map.

"…It is, yes, but there isn't anyone living there. Past attempts to develop it kept failing because of the large river nearby. Each time, the territory was abandoned and returned to the crown."

"Hypothetically speaking, if we built here, it would just about be midway between the royal capital and these larger cities in the west, right? That's why people were interested in developing the area in the past, isn't it?" I said, pointing to an empty area on the map.

Navre rubbed his chin as he sank deep into thought. Judging by his expression, however, he didn't seem to find the suggestion particularly promising.

"It would be great—if it were possible. The presence of a major river nearby poses a serious problem. It would inevitably come under constant monster attack. What are you going to do about that?"

"I'll use whatever means I have available. I'm getting my own knightly order anyway, so we might as well let recruits know we'll be pioneering undeveloped lands. Besides, if monsters do attack, the new magical tools will be handy in a fight! And of course, I'll be there, as well!" I declared, pointing to myself.

Navre seemed unconvinced, but Garkie almost doubled over with laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha! Right! Those monsters won't stand a chance against Lady Anis, slayer of dragons and secret vanquisher of vampires!"

"This is no laughing matter, Gark…," Navre murmured. "The point of this knightly order is to keep Princess Anisphia *out* of

harm's way. This would be completely counterproductive."

"I guess so, but you have to admit that there aren't many things out there that could beat Lady Anis."

"Don't encourage her…"

I couldn't help breaking into a chuckle. These two were almost like a comedy duo in their interactions.

It was true, however. As Navre said, given my status, this proposal for a new knightly order was probably to keep me from putting myself in harm's way.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do anything crazy. But if I have to act, I won't hesitate. So just let me supervise things from the back."

"…I'll try." Navre groaned.

"Besides, I was already thinking it would be good to situate this new city next to a river."

"You were?"

"I had this idea to build a device that could harness the power of the river, like an engine."

"The power of the river…? Like a waterwheel, you mean? You want to make a magical waterwheel?" Halphys asked, head cocked to one side.

I was a little surprised that she was suggesting it had to be magic.

After all, what I had in mind couldn't be more different.

"This probably sounds weird, coming from me, but is it really a good idea to rely on magic all the time? Traditionally or with tools. Both come with their own problems, right?"

"That's true…"

"I adore magic. I think it's wonderful. And I don't mean to deny all the achievements of the nobility, but it's precisely because nobles have magic that they've monopolized so much power and privilege. And that's caused all sorts of conflicts."

"So you're saying we shouldn't rely too much on magic?" Navre asked, furrowing his brow.

I nodded. "I think it's an excellent option. It's handy, but it isn't all-powerful. Not unless you're someone like Euphie."

"You're comparing us to Lady Euphyllia…?" Garkie murmured, crossing his arms with a hesitant look.

Comparing themselves to a spirit covenantor like Euphie, most magic users would no doubt feel like they came up second best.

But there weren't many people like Euphie. Everyone had their own strengths and weaknesses when it came to magic. When it came down to it, magic was just one of many possible sources of power.

Personally, I felt like the kingdom's spiritualistic faith didn't really encourage this kind of thinking, though.

"People are worried we might run short of spirit resources if we keep developing magical tools, right? So I thought we should try to make use of other power sources as much as possible."

"So this is about resource conservation?" Halphys asked.

"Not even magic is eternal. We might not be able to depend on it one day. It might even become obsolete. Right?"

Halphys's eyes widened in astonishment. She seemed genuinely taken aback, so I hurried to clarify my thoughts.

"It's a possibility, is all I'm saying. We don't know if something might happen in the future that makes magic unusable."

"…So you're suggesting it might one day become unavailable to us?"

"I never even considered that…"

"No one wants to imagine a future where they've lost the use of magic. I'm not surprised you haven't thought about it," I said.

"…I suppose I've taken it for granted. But now that I'm thinking about it, I don't think I'll be able to get it out of my mind." Navre exhaled as he rubbed his brow.

Halphys likewise took a deep breath to calm herself.

"Not even the first king could use magic originally, right?" Garkie murmured quietly, having remained relatively unconcerned through the last exchange. "So maybe there *will* come a day when our descendants can't use it, either…"

"…Don't scare us, Gark," Navre muttered.

"I mean, there are already people like Lady Anis who can't use it at all, right?" Garkie pointed out.

Navre turned suddenly pale. "…! My apologies! That was a thoughtless remark…!" he stammered, kneeling before me.

"Ah, er, it's fine. Don't worry about it, okay?" I reassured him, taken aback by his apologetic response.

I *was* a little flustered, but I urged Navre to raise his head.

"That was inconsiderate of me," he said. "I am well aware of your circumstances, Princess Anisphia, but I spoke out of turn… I'm truly sorry."

“I said it’s fine. I know you didn’t mean anything by it. Just be careful, okay? This isn’t the best time to say anything inflammatory in front of others.”

“Indeed…”

“Magic is taken for granted by the aristocracy. That’s why you feel more strongly about it than I do. That’s all.”

“Princess Anisphia…”

Halphys gave me a pained look. I realized that no matter what I said, the possibility of losing magic would always be a concern for those who possessed it.

I had hoped to mend the situation, but I could see now that there could be no brushing away that concern. After pausing to take a deep breath, I faced the three of them once more.

“Anyway. It’s not just about people like me who can’t use magic at all. There are also children who struggle with developing their skills, right? They often have difficulty in life, even as nobility…”

“Well…”

“Yes, I know it’s the rule of the land, and that it was necessary for the kingdom to maintain order. But behind all that, you have people who suffer for it.”

Whatever happened, I didn’t want to sacrifice anyone. Truly.

But sometimes, someone had to carry the burden. People even volunteered to shoulder it. How would those around them respond to that decision?

I had allowed Euphie to become queen in my place. I could no longer turn back down the path I had taken. No matter how difficult the road ahead was, I had to keep moving forward.

“I want to create new possibilities. Magic may be a precious thing, but it can’t be everything. In the future, new technologies harnessing all different types of power might arise, even those that don’t rely on magic. Magic may become just one of many options. I want to imagine a future where the common folk can create things just as good as magic without having to rely on magic.”

“…Is that possible?” Halphys asked.

“I don’t know. But the world would be better off if it was. This new city, I hope, will be the first step toward fulfilling that dream,” I responded quietly. That was my prayer.

My three companions fell silent.

“…Now that you’ve pointed out the possibility of losing magic, we can’t just ignore it, can we?” said Halphys.

“If that time ever comes, it’d be good to have other options, like magicology and magical tools,” said Navre.

“We’re making preparations for the future, right?” said Garkie.

“It sounds interesting, don’t you think?” I asked excitedly. “Something that can rival magic without actually being magic. If dependence creates inequalities, then we need other options as well. I don’t want to repeat the same old mistakes again and again. The kingdom’s social problems and the danger posed by vampires are both because of an unhealthy obsession with magic. Of course, magicology could be just as dangerous in the wrong hands. In the end, it all comes down to the people involved.”

Without an awareness of past mistakes, you can never learn; we needed to make sure we knew the lessons of the past to avoid causing the same problems again.

“Well, we’re just talking about possible futures. There’s no point dwelling on it now. Besides, I think magic is a wonderful gift. I’m just wary of trusting in it blindly. I don’t want to lose my way. Without someone to stop me, I might end up pushing too far. And then all sorts of people might get hurt…”

“I see…”

“We’ve had several blessings in disguise, I think. We’ve seen firsthand what happens when you go down the wrong path. We need to make sure we don’t make the same mistakes,” I said.

Lilana and her vampires were on my mind. Their obsession with magic had led them astray, causing wanton destruction and bringing about their own downfall.

As the one who rejected Lilana’s wish, I had to make sure I didn’t fall victim to the same hubris.

“I agree, Your Highness.” Halphys nodded gravely.

While they remained silent, Garkie and Navre wore thoughtful, equally earnest expressions.

“Of course, there’s no guarantee we won’t slip up, so I want to broaden the range of possibilities. I want to develop magicology, and I want to value traditional magic, too. We might not be able to give everything the same amount of attention, but I want to be as open as we can.”

Besides, magic and magical tools weren’t inherently at odds. Combined, they could accomplish so much more than either one alone.

Sure, I had my concerns, but those didn’t dampen my hopes.

You couldn't let yourself be cowed by fear of the unknown. You had to acknowledge possibilities and confront them head-on.

"So magic isn't everything…?" Navre murmured.

"…As someone who wasn't blessed with much skill in it, I think I understand." Halphys nodded.

Maybe I had been a bit overdramatic there? I felt a little embarrassed.

At that moment, Garkie, looking unusually serious, spoke up. "I'm not sure if I'm following correctly, but the point is that we should try all different ways to make people happy. Right?"

"Garkie… You're not wrong."

With that, I felt the tension in my shoulders melt away. And it wasn't just me. Navre seemed to slump forward, too, as he rubbed his forehead. Halphys let out a soft chuckle.

Taking that as my cue, I tried steering the conversation back on track. "I think natural forces hold just as much potential as magic. Even if they're limited to specific locations."

"There aren't a lot of magical tools in actual use yet, but once they start gaining popularity in the kingdom, there's no telling how many spirit stones will be needed… Which is why I think we need to prepare other technologies as soon as possible."

"Spirit stones are also traded with other countries, you know…?"

"I'm not saying we'll run out, not with our current supply and all the untapped resources throughout the kingdom."

But just in case… In fact, I had heard that other countries lacked the know-how to mine spirit stones the way we did in the Kingdom of Palettia.

My mother, having formerly served the kingdom as a diplomat, was well versed in the affairs of other countries. According to her, the Kingdom of Palettia was relatively unique in its abundance of monsters and spirit resources. There were fewer monsters in other lands, and in turn, fewer spirit resources that could be extracted.

The Kingdom of Palettia was founded as a nation of powerful magic users who carefully guarded the land's rich spirit resources. The reason my father tried so hard to maintain the status quo and mediate disputes between the kingdom's nobles was to prevent a decline in their overall numbers. After all, if the aristocracy shrank, the kingdom would become less effective in turn, rendering the realm unable to assert itself.

On that point, Euphie was breaking the rules as a spirit covenantor. Her achievements were proof of the spiritualist faith, but she was drawing on them to promote reforms.

Despite her complicated situation, she had proven outstandingly effective, so I had no complaints.

"Back to the issue at hand, I have to put forward an official request, so let's all come up with ideas for our ideal city," I said, clapping my hands to get everyone's attention. "First, I want to discuss whether we want to place the city by the riverside. I'm interested in studying how we can best harness the water. The main issue will be an increase in monster attacks. However, I want to proceed on the assumption we'll be able to respond to any monster encounters."

"It's a real issue, but if you insist, we can put it aside for now," Navre answered. "We will have to strengthen the city's defenses, though."

"That means walls. And then there's the terrain. It needs to be easily defensible, yes?"

"That's also important. But it would be even better to have a way to detect attacks ahead of time. A hilltop would be preferable, I think."

I jotted each of these points down in my notebook.

Navre's comments, it seemed, were mostly from the point of view of security and defense. Halphys, on the other hand, approached the matter from a researcher's perspective.

"I suppose this will only matter once the city is already built, but what do you actually plan to use the river for?" she asked.

"Right. Well, by using the flow of the water to rotate an axis, we could automatically grind wheat or spin a water tank to wash laundry."

"That…would indeed make a huge difference in people's standard of living."

"I have to admit, I sometimes wonder why we don't use magic to do those things."

"Because magic is for responding to monster attacks…," Navre answered.

"Sure. But on the frontier, even nobles have to do everything themselves."

"Hmm… Ah, so that's another regional difference. I didn't know…"

“It’s not your fault, Navre. I don’t want to devalue magic users or anything.”

“I think the older generations in particular tend to be more worried about acting the part,” Halphys interjected. “In my family, poverty was never a concern. I wonder if wealthy nobles don’t do that sort of thing due to concerns about status and prestige.”

“Right. For families that have built themselves up over generations, it isn’t wrong to take pride in their accomplishments.”

“But pride won’t fill your stomach. If you’re struggling to make ends meet, daily conveniences are more important than honor or anything like that,” Garkie noted.

“You have a point. You can’t move on to the next stage unless you have a base standard of living,” I answered. “I think that’s why we have disagreements sometimes—because we have different perspectives there.”

“I see… It isn’t easy to change your thinking all of a sudden…”

“If life were that simple, the world would be a peaceful place. It’s just human nature.”

Navre came from a prestigious background; his family was so well regarded that he had been chosen from a young age to serve Allie, the future king. I could see why it would be difficult for him to put aside the values he had been instilled with from birth.

Even so, I could see that he was being sincere. He was too serious, sure, but that was counterbalanced by Garkie’s laid-back nature.

“If magical tools can be mass-produced, we might not need to rely on traditional magic to repel monsters. If that happens, people will probably come to think of it more as a convenient ability. That would make the world a lot more fun and agreeable, don’t you think?” I asked.

“…I see,” Navre answered. “If this new city can serve as the forerunner of such a future, it would go down in history as a huge achievement.”

“Come on, Navre. Now *you’re* being dramatic, no?”

“If you weren’t so dramatic, Princess Anisphia, other people wouldn’t be, either, if you ask me,” Garkie opined.

“Garkie!” I exclaimed. “That was rude!”

“Huh?!” He recoiled.

“You dolt…,” Navre muttered in exasperation.

“Ha-ha-ha…” Halphys laughed, seemingly unsure how else to

react.

As far as I was concerned, there was nothing wrong with a little light banter. We would never find time to relax if we took everything seriously all the time.

And so we set about gathering ideas for our ideal city plan, pausing every now and then for some casual conversation.

“Mm-hmm. I think it’s all starting to come together. What do you all think?” I asked, gauging everyone’s reactions.

At this, they all turned suddenly serious, as if waking from a deep dream.

Navre, rubbing the crease between his eyes, let out a low moan. “…I think I drifted away a little. It’s overwhelming. You’re really serious about building this city?”

“I thought it sounded great while we were throwing ideas around, but now that we’ve got a relatively complete outline, it’s starting to make me feel a bit uneasy… It isn’t just me, is it?”

Everyone’s reactions were starting to make me feel anxious, too. The fact that none of them answered me only added to my concerns.

Then again, looking over our notes, nothing stood out that could be removed. All the same, though, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we might be going too far.

“This is so radical…no, eccentric, maybe…or outright mad…?”

“Now aren’t *you* the one being rude, Navre?!” Garkie said.

“Huh?! M-my deepest apologies, Princess Anisphia!” Navre stammered, quickly bowing his head.

I couldn’t bring myself to feel angry with him. After all, I couldn’t deny that he was right…

“It certainly is a visionary proposal, crammed full of ideas… What do you think, Halphys?” I asked.

“Um… Well, it *is* somewhat typical of Your Highness…”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?!” I demanded.

Halphys awkwardly averted her gaze, while Garkie and Navre nodded along in wordless agreement.

I felt like I was being left out, even though we had all assembled this plan together.

“Anyway, I’ll see what Euphie thinks. If it doesn’t pan out, we may have to consider some changes, but if we can make it work, it might go down in history as something truly monumental, don’t you think?”

“Indeed.”

“You have a point.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“I was joking!” I shot back. “None of you are going to contradict me?!”

That night, I showed Euphie our proposal for the new city.

She read the documents once, then a second time, tilting her head to one side as she pondered over them.

Finally, after a long, drawn-out silence, she responded with a gentle smile. “You never disappoint, Anis. I would have expected no less.”

“Here’s my proposal for the new city. Please take a look.”

At our next meeting, everyone—with the exception of Euphie, who had already perused the documents—turned their attention to the materials we had prepared.

As the pages turned quietly, a range of expressions fell over the faces of those attending.

Some widened their eyes in surprise, others furrowed their brows as if having difficulty comprehending, while others broke into curious smiles. The second reaction was the most common.

“Princess Anisphia… This proposal… It’s…,” Lang began in a quiet voice.

“I know it might seem a little eccentric,” I interrupted. “I’ve included an outline with the proposal to illustrate my intentions, and I’m open to questions.”

“Questions… Yes, I believe I’ll have a great many of those.”

Amid the confusion and unease of those in the room, Lang calmly approached with a bunch of documents in hand. “First, did you take into account the dangers inherent to locating construction along the riverbank?”

“I understand your concern. Yes, the Kingdom of Palettia rarely suffers from water shortages, thanks to water magic and water-type spirit stones. Rivers are often visited by all sorts of monsters seeking drinking water, so we’ve tended to avoid them.”

“Precisely.”

“However, I believe it’s possible to move our society forward by harnessing the power of natural resources such as rivers.”

At this explanation, Lang placed the documents down on the table and covered his mouth, closing his eyes as if lost in thought. “The power of *natural* resources…?” he answered after a short pause. “Couldn’t we simply rely on your magical tools without having to situate the city by the river? Why take the risk?”

“As you’ve all noted previously, there’s every likelihood that the widespread use of magical tools could cause the demand for spirit stones—and thereby their prices—to rise. Yes, if all you want is a source of power, magical tools based on spirit stones should be

good enough. But I think it would be a waste not to harness other resources available to us."

"…A waste, you say?" Lang murmured, his expression softening. The faint smile around the corners of his eyes betrayed a hint of surprise.

"On top of that, if this new city is successful, we could use it as a model to build other riverbank towns. Basically, we could use the river itself to build a distribution network."

Yes, I had other goals in mind for this new settlement beyond simply researching magicology.

If this plan proved successful, it would provide the knowledge and experience necessary for future development. In time, more towns would grow along the water's edge, allowing us to use the river as a means of transportation.

Roads and transportation facilitated the free movement of people—and goods. Commerce would flourish, and the people would prosper, ultimately leading to the enrichment of the entire realm.

"So you intend not only to open access to the sky, but to rivers, too?" Lang asked.

"Yes. In the future, I'd even like to turn my attention to the sea."

"The sea?!"

"I've always wanted to secure a stable supply of resources from the sea. I figured we'd start by conquering rivers first."

"What…?"

The room filled with audible gasps, a potent mix of confusion and astonishment.

The seashore likewise belonged to monsters, and though it was an attractive territory for gathering resources, the cost of developing and defending the area was simply too great. In fact, many such attempts had met with failure over the years.

There was no telling if developing it would prove successful during my time, but I wanted to dream big.

"If it could be realized, that would indeed be a triumph…"

"It's a fascinating proposal…but given the frequency of monster attacks at riverside locations, we would need to devote considerable energy to defense."

"I'm willing to take to the battlefield myself on that count…," I ventured.

“Anis? Shall I pretend I didn’t just hear that?” Euphie said with a taut smile.

“I—I know, Euphie! I only meant if it was absolutely necessary! I’d hope knights equipped with magical tools would be able to handle most cases!” I clarified.

Euphie forgave me with a nod, then turned to gauge the reactions of the others in a way that somehow reminded me of my mother. A chill ran down my spine…

“Ahem. Um, in the future, even commoners who can’t use magic should be able to use magical tools to improve their combat skills. It might take some time, but I think we should be able to build up a force to respond to monster attacks. Even riverside ones.”

“The notion may be outlandish, but your response is satisfactory. May we move to my next question?” Lang asked.

“Sure,” I answered. “What do you want to know?”

“I understand the ideals that you wish to pursue in this new city. But could you share with us what exactly you mean by suggesting the use of traditional magic during the construction process?” Lang asked, prompting the other nobles gathered to turn suddenly tense.

Of course, I had anticipated this question. After all, using magic to aid in construction would be seen as forcing members of the aristocracy to engage in manual labor. There would be a backlash.

“Let me explain. Just like you said, building by the river means there’s greater risk of monster attacks. For that reason, we would need to build the defensive walls as soon as possible. I think using magic to help with that is the way to go.”

“You want nobles to imitate the work of architects?”

“No. What I’d like is educational help.”

“Educational help…?” Lang blinked a few times.

With a small smile, I continued with my explanation: “What I’m looking for isn’t nobles, but rather *people who can use magic*.”

“P-Princess Anisphia… You can’t possibly…?!”

“There’s no point sugarcoating this, so I’m just going to say it. I’d like to hire the illegitimate children of nobles, particularly those active as adventurers.”

The moment I finished speaking, the room fell into pandemonium. I could understand the nobles’ reactions. They spent most of their time trying to ignore the existence of nonaristocratic magic users…

“We can’t afford to keep turning a blind eye to them. I think this plan can help put their talents to greater use.”

“I see… You *don’t* expect nobles to engage in civil engineering work?”

“That’s right. I’m only looking to recruit people who are interested in and willing to support the project. Magic users not of noble birth tend to value the practical function of magic, so if given clear purpose and reward, I think they’ll be willing to help.”

“I see. So that’s your move…!”

“You mean to gather talent scattered throughout the kingdom and put them to work building this settlement! It *is* a well-thought-out idea, considering they would be a valuable defensive force…!”

Judging from the reactions so far, I wasn’t facing as much opposition as I’d feared. I had known from the very beginning that asking nobles to engage in construction work would be a no-go.

What had caught the attention of everyone else in the room was the untapped potential of magic users living as commoners.

If we could bring them together and provide them with opportunities to play more active roles in society, it would give them every chance to excel.

On top of that, in order to maintain the class distinction, I had suggested asking the aristocracy to focus on education. That way, they could maintain their prestige and avoid having to engage in work they considered below their station.

At the same time, adventurers would be given the opportunity to learn formal magic techniques from those with training and experience. Seeing as most commoner magic users developed their abilities through self-study, this would be a rare chance for them to experience formal training.

I hoped that in the future, those who found success contributing to the new city might be awarded noble titles of their own. Should that be possible, we might finally be able to realize those long-cherished aspirations passed down through the generations.

“While certain adventurers may have an aptitude for magic, they never had the opportunity to study it formally. I’d like to ask for your cooperation teaching them. If any are willing, we’d also be happy to recruit noble relatives and children who aren’t expected to inherit their family estates.”

“Hmm… That doesn’t sound half bad.”

“But for commoners to use magic, even if for construction…”

Many of those gathered were responding favorably to this proposal, but some seemed unconvinced.

But there wasn't anything I could do about that. Until just recently, the notion that magic was the exclusive domain of the nobility had been common sense. You couldn't change that paradigm overnight.

"I think it's a great idea," said a new voice.

"Duke Grantz?"

"For a country to prosper, it is essential to prioritize the well-being of its citizens. We must never forget that magic is a means to protect the people. Does Princess Anisphia's plan not make effective use of that power?"

"Th-that's… You're right…"

Duke Grantz was so bluntly outspoken that I was taken aback.

Euphie likewise watched on in disbelief, while the other nobles seemed ill at ease. I appreciated the sentiment, but I wanted to *lighten* the atmosphere, you know?

"I believe that this is the perfect opportunity to clearly define the aristocracy's ambiguous status," Duke Grantz continued. "In that respect, Princess Anisphia's proposal offers an intriguing glimpse into the future."

"Th-thank you…"

"Though schools of thought may change, it's imperative that we pass the gift of magic on to the next generation without compromise. *That* should be our goal, yes?"

"Indeed. I feel the same way." Euphie nodded in agreement.

The nobles had mixed reactions. The ones with warmer expressions were coming around, while others were clearly conflicted even as they offered support.

And so my proposal was accepted, albeit with some minor modifications.

…The meeting was going well, as far as I was concerned. It was what happened next that summoned a dark cloud.

With the meeting over and the nobles leaving, I was about to call out to Euphie when Duke Grantz stopped me.

"May I have a moment, Princess Anisphia?"

"Duke Grantz? Sure."

"Now that we have a firm plan for the new city, it would be a good idea to give more thought to establishing your own knightly order."

Euphie, approaching from the side, was the first to respond. “I agree. You’ll need them for the initial inspection of the construction site.”

How efficient, tying both issues together, I thought to myself.

But what the duke said next took me completely by surprise.

“We will select a number of candidates, but as you will be made knight commander of this new order, you will need to meet with them all in person.”

“Hmm…? W-wait, whaaat…?!”

“Is something the matter, Princess Anisphia?”

“Are my ears playing tricks on me? You didn’t just say *I’d* be commanding it, did you?”

“Your ears are perfectly fine.”

“But that doesn’t make any sense!”

I *knew* I hadn’t misheard! But why on earth would that responsibility fall on me?!

“How can you say that so casually?! Making *me* a knight commander?!” I demanded, flustered.

Duke Grantz, however, remained perfectly composed.

No, really, wait. What was the meaning of this?!

“Um, I thought you wanted me to focus on my magicology research?”

“Indeed. This is to further that agenda.”

“No, no, impossible! Can’t you find someone more qualified?!”

“If we say it’s possible, then no one can say it is not.”

“But—”

“Considering the realm’s future trajectory, I can think of no better choice than for you to take on the role yourself, Your Highness.”

“B-but…!”

“Even as knight commander, it would be entirely appropriate for you to appoint someone to assist in the order’s day-to-day administration.”

“Then why not put them in charge for real…?”

“Would they be as well versed in magicology and the use of magical tools as you, Your Highness?”

It took me a moment to formulate a response to the duke’s question.

“U-um… Er… Someone who knows as much as I do about magicology and can command an order of knights…?”

“Precisely. If you know of anyone else with such talents, please do put their name forward.”

Was there anyone like that…? Of course not.

As if reading my mind, the duke continued. “Queen Euphyllia will assist in the city’s management, which is entirely appropriate, seeing as it falls under her direct jurisdiction. However, I have reservations about leaving the task of defense to Her Majesty, even if the knights in question are well versed in magicology and magical tools.”

“But does it really have to be *me*…?”

“Queen Euphyllia has already given her consent. If you are unable to choose the order’s members yourself, Princess Anisphia, we will select our own candidates.”

That last part made me want to scream! How had it come to this?! Couldn’t he see he was being *way* too forceful?!

And why wasn’t Euphie saying anything?! I glanced toward her, but she quickly averted her gaze.

“Um, I still think there’s got to be a better way than making *me* the group’s commander…,” I murmured weakly.

Duke Grantz narrowed his eyes. “Princess Anisphia.”

My spine stiffened. “Y-yes…?”

“Since the knightly order will be deeply involved in the study of magicology, I believe you should lead it. If you are absolutely opposed to such an arrangement, we may be able to leave leadership to Queen Euphyllia, as per usual. However, your position will suffer.”

“U-um… But…”

“Queen Euphyllia is working to ensure that you maintain a high degree of freedom, and I have no intention of standing in her way. That being said, you are also a member of the royal family. You realize, I hope, that if something were to happen to Her Majesty, you would be expected to take her place?”

“…?! Duke Grantz!”

The duke’s suggestion was so unthinkable that I cried out in alarm.

“This should not come as news to you, Princess Anisphia,” he continued, watching me indifferently. When his gaze met mine, I had nothing to say.

“In the unlikely event that Queen Euphyllia collapses or is unable to lead, that is. You cannot deny that there are occasions

when she may need to take time to recover, no?"

"Th-that's true, I guess…"

"Or should we fall back on our former sovereign? I should point out there's no telling how much longer he will remain in good health."

"…I get that!"

"Princess Anisphia, your father and I are of an older generation. It's the natural way of things that parents depart the world before their children, except in tragic circumstances."

My breath caught in my throat, and I bit my lip to stop myself from blurting something out in response.

I *knew* that. I really did. Still, Duke Grantz's bluntness had shaken me. I wasn't the smartest person in the world, but even I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid responsibility if worse came to worst.

"Of course, if it comes to that, we, as your subjects, will do our utmost to assist you. That said, what will you do? You can choose to sit back and wait with no real power of your own, but if that doesn't sit well with you, I suggest you make use of your own royal authority."

"Duke Grantz…"

"I am still at an age where I can expect to continue serving. However, I will eventually grow old, and there's no guarantee that some unexpected fate isn't lying in store for me."

The duke was earnest and to the point. In his heart of hearts, he was thinking about my best interests.

His words struck heavily, leaving me unable to muster a response.

"You should take greater heed of your own strengths and potential. That will help you see more clearly how others perceive you."

"…I understand. Thank you for your advice."

"Consider this a learning opportunity. I know what you're feeling; I have an indecisive friend, one who isn't easily swayed but is kind of heart and ever ready to carry others' burdens," the duke said with a mischievous chuckle.

I knew he was letting me see a little of the man underneath, but I never knew how to react to it.

But seeing the way he was acting now, I was finally able to relax.

“I’ll give your suggestion serious thought, Duke Grantz.”

“Please do. You should also give greater thought to how others regard you, Princess Anisphia.”

“How others regard me…?”

“Human connections are precious things, not easily come by. I would like you to expand your horizons not only for Queen Euphyllia’s sake, but in the knowledge that your forebears have entrusted you with the dreams they were unable to accomplish. I hope we can continue to count on you.”

“…I don’t really know if I’m cut out for it, but I’ll do my best.”

“If you have any concerns, consult those around you. Now then, it’s time for me to leave,” Duke Grantz said with an amused grin.

As I watched him go, Euphie smiled back at me. “Good luck, Anis.”

“Ugh… Why is this happening to me…?!”

“Don’t be like that. I want to help you, too. This *is* necessary, you know…?”

“But still…!”

I was in a real bind here. All I could do was make a stupid face while Euphie gently patted me on the head.

* * *

“…So I’m to be a knight commander?”

Ever since my surprise conversation with Duke Grantz, I had been mulling over whether to accept leadership of this new knightly order. But I just couldn’t make up my mind.

“What should I do…? I suppose if I let someone else manage it for me, I’d just be putting my name on it…”

Even speaking my thoughts out loud, I couldn’t convince myself to go along with the idea. I found myself staring up at the ceiling as I breathed a deep sigh.

“…I thought I understood everything. I really did.”

As Duke Grantz had said, only the gods knew for sure whether Euphie would always remain in perfect shape.

We could always turn to my father while he was alive and well, but I couldn’t say with confidence whether relying on him was the best course of action, either…

“I’ve depended on others for too long… I *like* depending on other people… But I know I’ve got to stand up for myself more…”

I was fed up with being a member of the royal family, with the weight of my responsibilities.

Yet it was a weight that Euphie, my father, Allie, and everyone else had been forced to carry.

For the longest time, I had been able to keep my distance, to explore my own ideas—but the situation had changed. And I had to change with it.

“Hmm… Duke Grantz suggested I consult the people around me, so maybe I should try asking Navre and the others. They might be able to introduce me to someone who would be a better fit.”

With that thought, I wasted no time summoning the three of them and sharing the gist of my conversation with the duke.

“Basically, they accepted most parts of our plan for the new city, but then the other issue came up.”

“About making you a knight commander, you mean?” Halphys asked.

“It’s an honor… But it sounds like you’re taking it as a burden, Princess Anisphia,” Navre said.

“Exactly…,” I said with a sigh. “I just don’t feel like I’m up for it. Maybe someone else would be a better fit…”

“Really? I think you’d do surprisingly well, Lady Anis,” Garkie responded casually.

I had been hoping to have a serious conversation, so I couldn’t help but crease my brow in a frown. “Garkie… You know I haven’t been a proper member of the royal family for years, right? And to begin with, I don’t remember ever becoming a knight. Don’t you think it’s a little weird to make me a knight commander all of a sudden?”

“Well, when you put it that way… But a knightly order involved in magicology research would make the most sense. You have the knowledge and experience to lead it, and the status, too. Don’t you think?”

“Ugh… B-but this is *me* we’re talking about, you know?”

I understood what Garkie was trying to say, but the weight of this responsibility made me want to shy away.

“Um… I have to say, I agree with Gark, Princess Anisphia.”

“You too, Halphys?!”

“I also think it would run smoothest with you at its head.”

“Not you too, Navre?! Come on, I’m not even a knight!”

“But you’re well-liked by everyone in the Royal Guard, aren’t you?”

“Ugh.”

“As for ability, you *have* subdued a rampaging dragon…”

“Ngh.”

“You’re of royal blood, and Her Majesty is your adoptive sister. Your position more than warrants the honor.”

When they spelled it out so clearly, I had to admit it did make sense. But still I had my doubts.

I just couldn’t imagine myself as a knight commander. Not at all.

“I—I mean… I don’t know the first thing about being a knight!” I insisted.

“There’s nothing stopping you from learning,” Navre pointed out. “Besides, you can rely on an assistant for any practical matters, seeing as you’ll be busy with your magicology research.”

“But wouldn’t that basically mean my assistant would be in charge?”

“No. Having you as the nominal leader would be incredibly important,” Navre assured me, his tone much stronger than usual.

“Navre…?” I startled, taken aback by his solemn mood. Without realizing it, I stood up straighter.

“I hope to gain your trust, Your Highness.”

“My trust?”

“Yes. Please be honest. You don’t see me as an equal partner, do you? In other words, you don’t yet fully trust me.”

Navre’s question left me at a loss for words, but I couldn’t quite deny it.

I had a favorable opinion of him as a person, but when it came to having him work under me, I wasn’t so certain.

Once again, I couldn’t help but acknowledge the truth in his words.

“But I understand. It can’t be helped if you don’t fully trust me,” he said.

“It can’t?”

“You yourself said you don’t know anything about being a knight. That you don’t believe yourself suitable to command. That’s a natural response, if you ask me.”

There he went again, pointing out facts I couldn’t possibly

deny.

"No one can truly know something without learning it. Given your circumstances, it's only natural that you don't know how to lead. And any group that can't fully follow its leaders is doomed to fall apart. That's why you want to entrust it to someone you think is more suitable, isn't it?"

"I mean, there *has* to be someone who deserves it more than I do…"

"Even so, I hope it will be you."

"…Why?"

"Because you're worthy of respect. Sure, you have a bit of a wild side, and as royalty, your behavior is sometimes hard to watch. But you *are* royal, and you *do* have what it takes to be a leader."

I could hardly muster my voice in response to all this.

Why did he believe so strongly in me? I just couldn't wrap my head around it.

"The relationship I would like to have with you is one in which you trust me to perform my duties. I don't think I'm alone in that. A knight of common birth would probably want that even more than I do."

"Navre…"

"That's why I feel like you should lead. If you don't know what to do, then find someone to assist you, someone who can fill in for what you don't have. That kind of arrangement is what matters most."

"…I still don't *feel* up to it."

"Princess Anisphia, I'm sure there are many individuals who would be honored to serve under you and earn your trust. Please, grant their hopes."

"They would be honored to earn my trust…?"

"*Honor* is just a name we give to a job well done. It may be little more than a title, but it's certainly not a meaningless one."

"I kind of get that, but still…"

"Earning one's leader's trust is an honor for any knight. Speaking for myself, I hope to guide you while earning your trust," Navre said, resting his hand on his chest. His fist was clenched so tight that he was almost sweating.

Ah, so he was nervous, too. But he was still fighting to make sure his feelings were put into words. It would be disrespectful to let them go unanswered.

“I don’t consider myself a great knight, and I still have much to learn. But if you’ll rely on me, I’ll dedicate myself to serving you wholeheartedly.”

“Navre…”

“You’re past the point of being chosen by others, Princess Anisphia. You’re the one who should be doing the choosing. Since I’ve started serving under you, I’ve come to understand you a little better, I think. I’d be more than pleased to help if you’ll have me as your assistant, and as I come from a good family, I doubt anyone would complain. It would be best, I think, to seek Baron Cyan’s help organizing the knights from common backgrounds. And Gark might not be suited to a position of authority, but he *is* adept at ingratiating himself with others.” Navre’s voice dropped a level, his eyes downcast as though in prayer. “Please trust us. We’ll spare no effort in serving you. With you to guide us, we’ll all overcome our fears. As your knights, we’ll do everything in our power to live up to your expectations.”

Trust us—those straightforward words were unyielding, which was why they struck so keenly.

“You sent us away during your fight with Lilana, saying that we were holding you back. That would be a point of shame for any knight. Yet you’re that strong. With that strength as our standard, with the future you’ve made possible as your beacon, you can unite us all. Because your future is worth it. As a knight, I feel honored to serve someone who deserves my respect as much as you do. Please remember that.”

* * *

“Join me for a drink tonight, Euphie.”

I called out to Euphie as soon as she returned to our private room in the detached palace after completing her official duties. I held out a bottle of alcohol that Ilia had retrieved for me.

“Wine?” she repeated, staring back at me strangely. “That isn’t like you. You aren’t usually one to drink.”

“I *don’t* normally like it…”

I joined others when necessary, but I wasn’t a heavy drinker, and I didn’t like getting drunk out of my mind.

In short, this *was* a rare occurrence, but I felt like today was worth celebrating.

"What's the occasion?" Euphie asked.

"I told Navre and the others that I'm considering the role of knight commander."

"…I see. In that case, I'll join you."

"Thanks. Here you go," I said, handing her a glass.

"Allow me," Euphie offered, pouring the wine into each of our glasses.

"Hmm. Thanks."

We lifted our glasses into the air and clinked them together in a toast.

“Cheers.”

“Yes, cheers.”

I took a tiny sip.

Euphie, I noticed, was likewise drinking modestly.

“…I tried talking it over with everyone, about me and the knight commander job,” I said, leaning over with my hand placed under my cheek.

“How did they react?”

“They were all for it, more than I thought they would be. What Navre said really got me thinking.”

“Oh? And what was that?”

“That I should be the one doing the choosing, and that people would feel honored to be picked by me. He wanted me to consider their feelings, not just my own.”

“I see where he’s coming from.”

“You think so, too?”

“Yes. I pride myself on being worthy of your trust,” she answered with a faint smile.

I smiled at her gentle, happy tone of voice.

Right. That meant Euphie was one of them, grateful to have my confidence.

When I stopped to think about it, I could see what Navre meant. For whatever reason, I just never thought people would feel that way about me.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it, though,” Euphie continued.

“Hm?”

“As the commander of an order of knights, you would be responsible for anything that happens to them.”

“Yeah…”

“You have a very strong sense of responsibility, Anis. I’m sure you would end up taking everything upon yourself. I did consider hiring someone else we could trust to lead the knights, so you could focus on studying magicology. But, well…”

“Duke Grantz had other thoughts?” I asked.

Euphie nodded, flashing me a weak smile.

“I do understand why, though,” she continued, lightly swirling her wineglass. “If anything should happen to me, you would have to take my place as queen. It’s only natural, if you stop to think about

it… I didn't. I only realized it after he pointed it out to me." She stared into her cup, her eyes welling up. "I thought *I* could do it. I must have let pride get the better of me. I didn't mean to be conceited about my own abilities…but I thought I could resolve this without causing you any trouble, Anis."

"You're amazing, Euphie. You're doing a great job as queen. Honestly, you've already made my life so much easier."

"But that wasn't what my father said. He only talked about what would happen to the kingdom if I fell ill. It's a valid concern, but he didn't need to put it like that…," she muttered in complaint, downing her cup in one gulp.

"Ah… Ha-ha…" I chuckled, refilling her empty glass.

"I do kind of wish he would be more direct at times, but not with this… Well, I can't ignore what he said, though I ended up just letting it go at the time."

"What do you think, Euphie? Do you think I'm up to leading a band of knights?"

"I'm sure you'll get the hang of it in no time at all. You're dedicated, and you always do your best to look after others."

"Right…," I murmured weakly as I finished my wine.

Euphie was quick to refill my glass.

Swirling the wine around a few times, I downed it all in one big mouthful.

"…Bah!"

"Anis? You'll get drunk if you drink that quickly."

"That's exactly what I want. I want to talk with you about this point-blank…"

"…It makes you that uncomfortable?"

"I'm not saying I hate it. It's just…bewildering. I'm confused, and because of that, I can't work out what to do."

"That's understandable. Especially considering your circumstances up till now. As a knight commander, people will admire you, they'll dream about being like you—which means you'll end up pushing yourself even harder, right?"

"…I can't deny that."

"I understand it must be disconcerting. But that's exactly why I think you'll be a great leader. I'm sure not everything will go perfectly, but if you take your time, Anis, it will all be okay."

"…Right."

Euphie was confident it would all be fine. Just hearing her

reassurance seemed to lift a weight from my heart.

"…Euphie?"

"What is it, Anis?"

"You know, I never used to like wine."

"That isn't the sort of thing you say after inviting someone for a drink."

"But it's true. Whenever someone asked me to join them for a drink during my adventuring days, it always left me feeling really sick."

"You can't handle alcohol very well?"

"I'm not a strong drinker, no. But more than that, I can't handle *feeling* drunk. And I think I've figured out why."

Euphie said nothing, silently urging me to continue.

This time, I refilled my glass by myself. "How should I put it…?" I murmured. "I guess back then, I always felt like I was stuck with bad dreams."

"Bad dreams?"

"I'd given up on so much, but I still couldn't accept my lot in life. I can see that now, looking back. But I didn't have the time or experience to really think about it."

"What does that have to do with not liking getting drunk?"

"The only way I could keep myself sane was by drowning myself in bad dreams… At least that's how I feel now," I murmured, my voice softer than I had intended.

For a moment, I thought to put on a brave face…but I stopped myself. I owed it to myself to be honest, to let my true feelings show.

"Whenever I got drunk, I would realize how I was always drowning myself in my bad dreams. It made my true feelings come out even more strongly… Even when I was alone, I always wanted to keep them under wraps."

"Anis…"

"I don't think it's so bad anymore, using alcohol to open your heart. Now that you're here, I mean."

"I'm glad to hear that… Do you feel any differently now?"

"Yeah. But I'm sure I'll be full of complaints again tomorrow."

As I relaxed, I could feel a small smile forming on my lips.

Yes, I could speak honestly now, about anything at all.

"I've had good dreams and bad dreams. But I know I can't just keep dreaming forever."

“That’s why you’re unsure?”

“Yeah. I mean… I feel like I’m finally standing on firm ground, you know?”

Dreaming was like staring up into the clouds, and that was where I had been all my life.

The people around me—Euphie included—had given me the power to dream.

But now there were calls for me to look this way and that.

I had spent all my time dreaming, but now I was in the dreams of others.

So I couldn’t *just* dream. I had to act; I had to respond to those who needed me.

“I thought all I had to do was share my dreams. To be honest, I think I’ve already achieved that goal. Now I just need to make sure other people don’t give up. It’ll be a long journey; I know that. I feel like I didn’t fully realize how long until just recently.”

“I see… You certainly did have your head in the clouds, Anis.”

“I’m insecure. I mean, I believe in myself. But will other people believe in me…?”

“It’s difficult, being responsible for so many.”

“Even for you?”

“Yes, even for me.”

“That *does* sound trying…”

“Indeed.”

“If it’s hard for you, too, then I guess I just need to be patient and keep on trying.”

Euphie’s incredible, I thought. To take on so many responsibilities, to be entrusted to fulfill them all. And then to keep on doing it tirelessly.

It sounded grueling. The thought that I had given up on those same duties was almost overwhelming.

After a brief pause, Euphie let out a soft chuckle. “I’m pleased to hear you say all that, though.”

“Huh?”

“I wish you could focus on your own dreams. But it makes me so happy to see you being recognized more widely. You’ve been held back for so long.”

“…That’s why I’ve been so unsure. But we’re the ones who pushed for change, so we’ve got to step up now that it’s happening.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“Ah… But still, I don’t *want* to be a knight commander!”

“Then don’t, not right now. Tonight, let *me* indulge *you*.”

“Ugh! You’re so mean! Fine, fine, go ahead!”

“I knew you would say that.”

“You *made* me say it!”

“Is that how you feel? You’re saying I needn’t give it a hundred percent, are you?”

“Are you making a deal with me?! You’re getting to be more and more like Duke Grantz!”

“…?! H-hey, that was uncalled-for…! Why would you say that?!”

“Ah, looks like I’m at match point! You’re just too fun to mess around with, Euphie!”

“We’re not at all alike. Not at all!”

“Sure, sure, whatever you say. I’m sorry. Here, let me pour you another glass.”

The night wore on with the two of us exchanging banter and jokes.

I could only hope it would become a source of good dreams in the days to come.

CHAPTER 4
Setting Out

Ever since the project to build the new magicology city began in earnest, I had been swamped with work.

The first step was to secure the right personnel for our magicology research. Thankfully, Lang had introduced several individuals from the Ministry of the Arcane who were interested in joining us, and Halphys helped me to interview each of them in turn.

We were also busy screening the knights who had volunteered to join our new order, though with Baron Cyan's assistance, that was proceeding smoothly, too.

At the same time, I was officially appointed to my new roles.

The first was as head of the Magicology Laboratory, a new research institute under the direct control of the crown.

The second was as commander of the Magicology Guard, which was affiliated with the new laboratory.

In other words, as the Royal Sister, I was simultaneously in charge of both the Magicology Laboratory and the Magicology Guard.

What awaits you after assuming a position of leadership? Why, paperwork, of course.

And so I was in the detached palace, in a room I had set up to use as an office, collapsed over my desk and sighing with exhaustion. In front of me was a mountain of documents from which I wanted nothing more than to escape.

"Why do I have to sign so many forms…?" I muttered with a heavy heart.

"This is one part of your duties, Your Highness… Or should I call you Commander Anisphia…?" Navre remarked casually.

Now that my position had changed, so had his—Navre was now my official assistant. With his own father being commander of the Royal Guard, he drew on his knowledge and experience to advise me whenever necessary.

Incidentally, Baron Cyan had been named lieutenant commander of the Magicology Guard, but he was currently away

from the royal capital on a preliminary inspection of the development site.

After a polite knock at the door, Halphys stepped into the room with another bundle of papers. “Princess Anisphia? I have some documents for you to review…but you seem busy?” she said with an apologetic smile.

“Thank you, Halphys. It’s Commander Anisphia now, but I’ve complained enough, so there’s no need to worry about it.”

“Oh, but there is! The details are important!” said Navre.

“I know you’re busy, but you have to take care of yourself, Your Highness.”

“Hmm. That goes for you, too, Halphys. You seem a bit tired.”

“Well, yes. But Marion is helping me out,” she answered happily.

Seeing her reaction, I gave her a smile of my own.

Amid all these changes, Halphys was undergoing her own transformation. In the past, she wouldn’t have let her enjoyment show so readily.

“Married life must be wonderful,” I remarked.

At this, Halphys’s face turned bright red, and she averted her gaze as she fiddled with her bangs. “I—I’m sorry to bother you with my private life when you’re so busy yourself…!”

“None of us could have seen this coming. There’s nothing to apologize for, Halphys. No, this is on Euphie and me.”

“…It did come out of left field, I must admit.”

“Tell me about it. I thought Marion was going to marry into your family, but in the end, you married into his.”

“Ah-ha-ha…”

Yes, Halphys had tied the knot with her fiancé Marion during the initial stages of the planning for the new city.

Their wedding was a sudden arrangement and put together in quite a hurry. As a result, Halphys had been constantly on her feet.

How did their sudden marriage come about? Because of a family feud in her then fiancé’s home.

Originally, the plan had been for Marion to marry into Halphys’s family, the viscomital House of Nebels.

However, those arrangements were changed at the behest of Marion’s parents. As a result, Halphys married into the comital Antti family.

The reason for this change was that the family of the woman

engaged to Marion's older brother, who had been expected to inherit his family's titles and holdings, had been brought to ruin.

It all began when the head of their noble house committed a grave blunder.

"I certainly hadn't expected it. To think that he would suggest Queen Euphyllia take a royal consort… It's little wonder he incurred her displeasure."

"I understand wanting to be her partner, but what he said definitely crossed a line."

The noble at the center of this commotion was a strict adherent of the spiritualist faith with deep connections at the Ministry of the Arcane.

On top of that, he was on good terms with Count Antti and his family, which was what had led to the engagement in the first place.

He was one of those nobles I had clashed with during my more eccentric years, and I knew for a fact that he didn't like me.

No doubt that was because of his beliefs, but in any event, that dislike spurred him into action.

In short, he publicly implored Euphie to take a royal consort.

"Euphie was already keeping close tabs on him, but with that, his luck well and truly ran out…," I observed.

"Her Majesty was keeping an eye on him? Because of his past disrespectful conduct toward you?" Halphys asked.

“Well, uh, it seems that way…”

The nobleman had insulted me directly in the past, which was why Euphie had been watching him with suspicion. He was completely oblivious to the precariousness of his position and proceeded to make himself the target of Euphie’s anger.

“If all he did was suggest she marry someone, she probably would have let it go. But he went on and on about how precious Euphie was, then called our relationship a passing infatuation. No wonder she couldn’t stomach him anymore…”

“…Knowing the both of you, that’s an incredibly dangerous thing to say,” Navre murmured under his breath. His face had turned deathly pale, and he was rubbing his arms, a chill running through his body.

“If he understood how deeply Queen Euphyllia feels about you, he would have realized that was a fatal remark…,” Halphys noted.

“Maybe meeting a real-life spirit covenantor blinded his senses. Though he isn’t entirely wrong, saying that royalty ought to be able to love more than one person for the sake of the kingdom…”

“Well, I would never bring up that topic with Queen Euphyllia, that’s for sure,” Halphys observed with a sigh.

“Me neither. What happened is his own fault. Why bring suspicion onto yourself right when Her Majesty is cleaning up the aristocracy?” Navre murmured.

“It seems he didn’t like me very much. He’s free to think whatever he wants, but it wasn’t smart to actually say it out loud…,” I added.

Anyway, the incident resulted in a strong rebuke from Euphie.

Given that the man’s position had already been weakened due to the internal reorganization of the Ministry of the Arcane, it ended up being the final blow. It wasn’t long before his former allies abandoned him to his fate.

“I do feel a little sorry for him…”

“He’s reaping what he sowed.”

“I guess so…”

Common sense dictated that as queen, Euphie ought to marry in order to preserve the royal bloodline into future generations.

But our goal was to bring change to the Kingdom of Palettia, and because of that, it was unthinkable to broach the topic of a

royal consort so bluntly.

Plus, if the topic had to be broached, it should be done delicately and certainly not as a direct insult. I couldn't begin to imagine what the nobleman had expected to accomplish.

Then there were those who believed there was no great rush, seeing as Euphie was a spirit covenantor and could be expected to live a great deal longer than ordinary humans. It wasn't at all a pleasant topic, but I had heard whispers suggesting that she should marry after I passed away of old age. Of course, they didn't know that I was no longer human, either.

And there were those who sensed that neither Euphie nor I had any plans to have children of our own to usher in the next generation. People in that camp, whether in support or opposition, hadn't yet taken any overt action.

In short, this incident was simply blowback for a careless noble's own remarks.

Not that that mattered to the family involved, which was now on the precipice of disaster…

"I *am* sorry for his family, though—they were dragged into this for no good reason and abandoned by everyone around them…"

"It was a difficult decision, whether Marion taking over the Antti titles was really the best course of action…," Halphys admitted.

"Marion's brother is a determined man, that's for sure. It can't be easy marrying into a disgraced family and planning to restore their honor all by yourself."

No, Marion's brother couldn't ignore the crisis facing his fiancée's family—and so he argued that Marion, on account of his relationship with Halphys, Euphie, and me, was in a better position to lead the Antti family.

With that, Marion's brother chose to marry into his fiancée's ailing family to begin rebuilding their fortunes and reputation.

After much discussion between Count Antti and Viscount Nebels, it was decided that Halphys would marry into Marion's family, which Marion would be head of in due course.

With that settled, they decided to arrange an early marriage to put an end to all the suitors approaching Halphys on account of her association with me.

"Shouldn't we address you differently now? You *are* the future Countess Antti," Navre quipped.

“Don’t tease me. Marion doesn’t mind which name I go by.”

“I’m sure he still feels jealous, though?”

“Navre!” Halphys cried out, her cheeks turning bright red.

The old Navre wouldn’t have been so quick to tease, but I was pleased that we were all starting to see a different side of him.

“Ahem!” Halphys said, clearing her throat. “Speaking of which, you’ll be on your way to inspect the construction site soon, Your Highness.”

“I’ll be returning to the royal capital on holidays, but I’ll be spending most of my time at the site. Once construction is properly underway, I’ll probably ask you all to join me.”

“In the meantime, we’ll complete our preparations here.”

“I’ll leave you in charge, Deputy Director Antti.”

“I’ll make sure it’s all ready in time,” Halphys answered confidently, placing a hand over her chest.

Her task was to remain in the capital to oversee the education of applicants wishing to join the laboratory, as well as to source the materials that we would need for future research.

In effect, she would be representing me while I was away.

“It’s just as well, don’t you think, Halphys? You get to work with Marion, too,” I teased.

“I—I won’t mix personal and private matters!”

“Heh-heh. Sorry.”

“Excuse me! I’m back! Huh? I didn’t know you were here, Halphys!” Garkie exclaimed lightheartedly as he entered the room.

Navre’s eyebrows twitched, and he massaged his temple. Halphys let out a soft chuckle.

These three never change, I thought as I turned to Garkie.

“Welcome back. How did it go with the knights?”

“Baron Cyan—no, Lieutenant Commander Cyan—said to tell you he’s looking after the recruits, so no need to worry. A good number of them used to be adventurers, so they already know their way around.”

“I see. That’s good. There haven’t been any fights or anything?”

“Don’t worry about that. I mean, I do get why you’re concerned and all. Especially with nobles mixed into the batch. But still.”

Some members of the newly formed Magicology Guard had been directly scouted from various adventurers guilds.

My concern was whether they would be able to adapt to the rigors of being a knight—and that they might butt heads with the

nobles who had volunteered to join.

Most of the nobles who had enlisted with us came from unfavorable positions, with no real prospect of inheriting their families' estates or businesses.

But even so, they *had* been raised as members of the aristocracy, so it was quite a gamble on our part to lump them together with former adventurers.

"It makes sense that you're nervous, but most of the nobles didn't really have any status at home, so they're not all that antagonistic toward the adventurers," Garkie said in an effort to reassure me.

"I know I'm repeating myself, but you're sure?" I asked again.

"Definitely. The former adventurers are sharing their combat experiences with the nobles, while the nobles are teaching the adventurers about etiquette and manners."

"I see. I'm glad to hear it. In that case, I guess it's safe for me to head out."

"Yep. We won't be a hundred percent sure about the knights until they go on-site, but with Halphys staying on here as your deputy in the lab, there shouldn't be any issues."

"Are you ready, Lady Anis? You'll be taking some maids with you, I assume?"

"Yeah. I can't take a huge group, though."

After all, we were heading out into uncultivated lands. Daily life would be far from easy.

Not all our maids would be up to that task, so I had asked Ilia to handle the selection…

"You already know one of them," I said. "Charnée."

"Ah, Viscount Persimmon's daughter? Right, I heard a while back she had started working at the detached palace."

"She's good with a bow, and I think she would go far with a bit of magic training. At the very least, she knows how to defend herself, and she doesn't mind life in the hinterlands. She'll be my maid and also my bodyguard."

"She seems pretty loyal. She probably wants to repay you for saving her family's estate. It's a blessing, having her around."

"I know, right?! It's a good thing we beat that Fenrir!"

Navre and Garkie both had favorable impressions of her, as well. I was glad to see they all got along.

But at the same time, I couldn't help but breathe a deep sigh.

“Charnée’s an honest girl. No, it’s the other person coming with us, too…”

“Is there an issue with her?”

“Not like that. I mean, Ilia gave her stamp of approval to use her as my secretary.”

“If it wasn’t a question of ability, then what was the problem?”

“Well…”

Just before I could fully explain myself, there came a knock at the door.

“May I have a moment, Your Highness?”

As soon as that voice reached me, I found myself debating whether this was good timing or bad.

"…Come in, Priscilla."

"…Excuse me."

A maid entered the room. Her navy-colored hair was braided and tied back in a bun, while her sharp eyes were a purplish shade of blue.

Her conduct was so naturally rehearsed that it was practically impossible to read her emotions. As a maid, she was splendid, picture perfect.

Her name was Priscilla Socerror, and she was another maid Ilia had selected to serve me at the detached palace. She was also the other maid I would be taking to the development site along with Charnée.

Her work ethic was astounding, and she was so efficient helping me manage my schedule that I couldn't begin to thank her enough.

"This is the inventory for your stay at the planned development site, Your Highness," she said, calmly handing me a bundle of papers. "Please read it over to make sure there are no issues."

"Thank you. I'll take a look later."

"Please do. I will endeavor to make sure that life in the countryside doesn't compromise your dignity or status, Your Highness," Priscilla declared with a polite bow.

Her demeanor alone spoke volumes to her competence, yet Navre and the others seemed to find this strange. I wondered whether they had already guessed what the issue was…

"You're a huge help, Priscilla. Thank you."

"Not at all. If you appreciate my dedication, please convey those thoughts to Her Majesty. It would be an honor to serve by her side one day."

"Huh…? Wha…?!" Garkie blurted out.

"Oh? Is something the matter, Master Gark?" Priscilla asked.

"No… I mean, I wasn't expecting you to be so frank about that while serving Lady Anis and all…"

"Then let me ask you this. Would you trust a servant who conceals their true intentions behind endless flattery?"

"I guess that's true, but still… Huh…? Am *I* the one who's crazy here…?"

"This is how I express my loyalty. I already received prior approval," Priscilla responded.

Garkie glanced my way, followed a moment later by Navre and Halphys.

“She’s so forthcoming and honest, I guess I thought I could trust her…” I nodded with a soft chuckle.

“I’ve sworn allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Euphyllia, so if she orders me to serve Her Highness Princess Anisphia, I’ll do so with all my heart.”

“Ah, yeah… Sounds like her loyalty is just for Queen Euphyllia, though…?” Garkie pointed out.

“Her Majesty is so wonderful! I, Priscilla Socerror, would like nothing more than to dedicate myself to her, body and soul! As such, I have an ulterior motive to get along well with Princess Anisphia.”

“You don’t keep anything to yourself, do you?!”

“Oh? Better than to have people doubt me, don’t you think?”

In truth, there was also another reason I had taken her on—it would simply cause too many problems to let her stay with Euphie.

I wasn’t used to being the target of people’s loyalty, which was why I was relieved to see that Priscilla was so upfront about her dedication to Euphie, promising to serve me to get closer to her.

In fact, she was indeed meticulous and competent, and coming from a noble background, she was well versed in every aspect of formal etiquette. She was a valuable asset, compensating for my own shortcomings.

Her attitude could have used some work, but that was possible to overlook when need be.

“Well, you’re going to be seeing more of each other, so here’s to the future,” I said awkwardly.

“Thank you, everyone.” Without so much as a blink, Priscilla offered Navre and the others a respectful bow.

* * *

“…It’s almost time…,” I murmured to myself as night fell, quietly staring out at the sky from within my room.

Each passing day brought me closer to my inevitable departure for the development site.

There were so many pending matters that I had to double-check

before I left, which had led to a huge increase in documents requiring my attention.

I would be going by Airdra, so I could always return to the capital on my days off, but even so…

I was in a strange frame of mind, and before I knew it, my feet were carrying me out of my room and off to my workshop.

I had been so busy lately that I had hardly had a moment to spare to make use of it. Nonetheless, with Ilia diligently cleaning up every day, everything remained neatly organized, and there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen.

"…Something just doesn't feel right."

How many all-nighters had I pulled here, scattered documents lying all around, only to be scolded by Ilia in the morning?

The sight brought me back to those days I had met with repeated failures in my pursuit of magic.

"Back then, Ilia was the only person here at the detached palace with me…"

There had never been a great many visitors, but even then, I had kept a strict rule about letting only Ilia and Tilty inside. Most of my memories here were spent alone.

How things had changed. Now Euphie was queen, and people of all kinds were constantly coming and going.

It was a positive development, but I still felt uncomfortable with it all.

"I used to have such a twisted mindset, telling myself it was okay to be alone, seeing as no one understood me anyway…"

I was simply too different from everyone else, I believed, and no matter how much I wanted to be understood, they wouldn't accept me. I told myself I should give up on chasing after their acceptance. I would pursue magic alone.

Because if I didn't, I would be forever trapped within fences outside of my control, unable to breathe.

"I had Ilia, and Father and Mother gave me my freedom."

Looking back, I was the one who couldn't accept myself.

I yearned for magic, despite being unable to use it myself, and I pursued it desperately.

I *had* to produce results, otherwise I wouldn't be able to forgive myself. I was the one who had convinced myself of that, not anyone else—and I hadn't even realized it.

Was I any different now? At the very least, the pain I felt back

then seemed like a distant memory.

"Everyone gave me reason to keep on going… Thanks to them, I can look back warmly on it."

At the time, I never thought I was fighting an uphill battle. In hindsight, I realized now that I had been deliberately deceiving myself.

But those efforts hadn't been in vain. The memories I had built up over the years were what had shaped me into the person I was today. I could see that now.

Just as all those thoughts rattled around in my head, the door to my workshop swung open. Startled, I glanced toward it—and laid eyes on Euphie in her nightgown.

"Anis, you were in here?"

"Euphie?"

"You weren't in the bedroom. I came looking for you," she said, entering the workshop and approaching me slowly.

Once she was close enough, she took my hand in her own and intertwined her fingers with mine. I squeezed gently back.

We remained that way for a long moment, staring into each other's faces and exchanging awkward grins.

"I was feeling a little…sentimental, I suppose," I admitted.

"Because you'll be setting off to work on the magicology city in earnest soon?"

"I'll be leaving the capital, you know?"

"…I know." Euphie tightened her grip on my fingers. Though she said nothing else, it was clear she didn't want us to be apart.

"Will you miss me?" I asked.

"What about you?"

"Enough to feel sentimental?"

"Don't beat around the bush, please."

"Couldn't I say the same to you?"

"…Yes, I'll miss you," she whispered, leaning against me and resting her head on my shoulder.

Our nighttime chats had been a healing balm for us both.

Euphie had decided to become queen in my stead, and she had truly succeeded in making it to the top.

"…I felt like reminiscing."

"About what?"

"I guess I was thinking about the day your engagement got broken off and you first came to the detached palace."

Our fates had been intertwined ever since.

Back when I inadvertently crashed into the center of all the commotion, I could never have imagined that our relationship would blossom the way it had, that Euphie and I would stand by each other's side as we faced a bold new future. Just thinking about it made me smile.

"Anis?"

"I just feel a little strange is all. I never knew I'd fall so deeply in love with you."

"…You always liked me, didn't you?"

"You sound very confident, asking that."

"You've given me confidence," she answered warmly.

I couldn't deny it.

Euphie had a talent for magic that I had only ever dreamed about.

From my perspective, the two of us could hardly be any more different in that regard. My admiration of her bordered on envy. I was hopeless, wasn't I?

I couldn't believe we were so close now. No matter how many times I reflected on the events that had brought her here, it still seemed like such an unlikely coincidence. I was beyond fortunate.

"I guess I do love you enough to give you faith in yourself."

Those words were from the heart. When you say it out loud—*I love you*—your feelings start to rise to the surface and develop clear, unmistakable outlines.

I loved the time I had spent with Euphie, so much so that I didn't want to let it go. I couldn't stand to be without her. The closer I came to my departure, the more keenly I recognized that.

"Anis."

"Hmm? What now, Euphie?"

"…What would you do if I asked you not to go?" she murmured weakly.

As I leaned in closer, her hair shifted softly, draping over my shoulder.

She didn't have to say how lonely and vulnerable she would be with me gone. Life would be so much easier if I just gave in to these feelings.

Hoping to distract myself from such thoughts, I pressed up against her and stole a kiss from her lips.

Euphie blinked in surprise, staring back at me.

“Sorry. You were just so cute.”

“…Are you trying to distract me? Or to comfort me?”

“I’m not trying to distract you. I’m no coward. I meant it—really.”

“Then you *are* a coward, playing with my heart like that.”

“You started it!”

“There’s no evidence for that. Show me the facts.”

“Call it a crime of passion, then?”

Staring into each other’s eyes, we both burst out into uncontrollable laughter.

It was painful and indescribably lonely—but just being able to share our feelings together like this meant so much. Yes, the heart was an unpredictable thing.

“I’m not all right,” I began. “That’s why I’m acting so sentimental and dwelling so much on the past. But knowing that you feel the same way, Euphie—it’s such a relief.”

“…Yes, it is.”

We were both anxious about the same future. After all, since Euphie first came to the detached palace, we had seldom been separated for long periods of time.

But we had made a choice to reshape the country and build the future we both wanted—and we had to fulfill our responsibilities.

I knew that, but my heart still ached at having to leave Euphie. No matter how many times I tried reasoning with myself, I just couldn’t ease that sense of regret.

“Yes, I’ll really miss you. I don’t want to be apart,” I admitted.

“…I know.”

“But this is my dream, and it’s what you want, too, so I have to do what I can to make it happen.”

“This dream isn’t just yours anymore. I want it, too, as much as anything. Let’s both do our best, okay?”

“…Yeah.”

“I’ll fulfill my duties as queen, and I’ll be here when you come back. So please, spread your wings and fly freely. Follow your dreams. Whenever you need to take a break, come home. I’ll always be thinking about you, Anis. For you, I’ll do my very best.”

…Ah, I felt my cheeks growing hot. Yes, Euphie could be *too* direct at times…

Unable to bear it any longer, I caught her in an embrace and held on tightly, burying my face in her shoulder and letting her

presence wash over me.

"…No fair, Euphie."

"I don't understand. What's not fair?"

"You are. I love you—more than anything, Euphie."

"Yes… I love you, too, Anis."

I relaxed my arms to stare into Euphie's face. Naturally, it wasn't long before we closed the distance again as I pecked her on the lips.

But once wasn't enough. I kissed her again and again, as if to steal her breath away, while her hand circled around to my back and pulled me flush against her.

An eternity passed in the briefest of moments while I hugged her tight, my heart overflowing with affection.

"Whenever it gets too hard, send me a message," I said. "I'll come at once."

"I will."

"Don't try to be too perfect. It's all right to be weak. When things get tough, count on those around you."

"Yes."

"I love you more than anyone else in the whole wide world."

"Me too. I love you, Anis. More than anyone else."

I could hear Euphie's heartbeat and feel her breath. I never wanted to let go of this warmth.

The night wasn't over yet. There was still time enough to drown in this lovely glow.

* * *

Time passed, and the day came for me to leave for the site for the new magicology city. As the hour of our departure approached, I found myself staring up into the clear blue sky.

"I've finished checking your baggage, Your Highness," Priscilla called out.

Charnée was next to her. I had asked them both to see to all the last-minute checks.

"Thank you, Priscilla, Charnée," I said with a grateful smile.

"Not at all. I'll go and finish saying my goodbyes," Priscilla said.

“M-me too!” Charnée added.

“Heh-heh. See you soon.”

I broke out into a grin at Charnée’s innocent behavior. Watching them both leave, I let out a weak sigh.

At that moment, Navre and Garkie strolled toward me.

“Navre, Garkie, how did the briefing go with the escort?” I asked.

“Everything’s good,” Navre answered.

“So long as Navre here takes the lead properly, we’ll be fine!”

“…Isn’t it time you started behaving appropriately for your position, Gark?”

“Ha-ha-ha… Don’t you have to say bye to anyone?”

“I’ve already said my farewells!”

“Huh. So we can leave anytime.”

“That’s good to hear,” I answered.

A set of familiar faces arrived a few seconds later.

“It seems you’re all set, Anis.”

“Father! And you too, Mother!”

While Navre and Garkie were busy ribbing each other, my father and mother approached. Navre and Garkie immediately stood up straight, bowing respectfully to their former king.

“Your Majesties,” Navre said in greeting.

“There’s no need to be so formal. This isn’t some grand departure ceremony,” my father said, gently raising his hand to urge them both to relax.

Navre and Garkie relaxed slightly, and my father turned to me expectantly.

“Um, Father…?” I asked, feeling suddenly uncomfortable under the force of his gaze.

“…Anis, it means a great deal to me to see you’re leaving the detached palace,” he murmured before staring off into the distance.

“Huh?”

I was taken aback at first, but my surprise soon gave way to a sheepish grin.

“I’ll be back for holidays, but I see why it’s so emotional. I always thought leaving would mean I didn’t belong in the kingdom anymore.”

“Don’t say that,” my father scolded me. “You’ve long been indispensable to the realm.”

“That’s right, Anis!” my mother added in her usual stern tone of

voice. “You must realize you’re integral to the kingdom’s future. You should always keep in mind how your behavior is seen by others. You can’t run off recklessly like you used to…!”

“U-ugh…! Mother! Please don’t lecture me just before I go…!”

“That’s right, Sylphine,” my father said, much to my surprise. “Enough with the sermons today. Let’s just see her off with all sincerity. I understand your concerns, but you’re babying her a little, don’t you think?”

“…Ngh! *You’re* the one who spoils her, Orphans!” Her face turned bright red, and she slapped my father’s hip as hard as she could.

“Gah! D-don’t smack me!”

She cleared her throat in an effort to regain her composure, though her ears were still scarlet. “…Y-you take care of yourself, Anis. Make sure you come visit us whenever you’re back in the capital.”

“I will, Mother! Thank you so much!”

I was so overjoyed that I found myself embracing her in a tight hug.

“Oh! A-Anis?!” she cried.

No matter how old she got, she would always be my adorable mother.

“Anis…! L-let go of me…!”

“…I’m sorry for always making you worry, Mother. I’ll be all right now.”

“…Anis?”

“I’ll listen to the people around me and think my decisions through carefully. I won’t rush through life. And I’ll definitely come back. Everyone I care about is here. That includes you, too, Mother.”

“Ah… I—I understand…! S-so let me go, please…!” She pushed back weakly. Her face was even redder than it had been before.

Ah, she truly was adorable.

With one last tight hug, I finally released her. She fell silent, seemingly unsure what to do next, her eyes shimmering with tears.

Next I turned to my father, who was watching on with a gentle smile.

“There’s nothing left for me to say. Apply yourself, Anis.”

“Yes, Father. Stay well. I’m looking forward to reading your research reports, too!” I answered.

He rested a hand on my head, which I took as his approval.

There was nothing else I wanted to share with them right now. It wasn't like this was goodbye forever. I would be back before anyone knew it.

"Anis."

"Euphie."

Next up was Euphie, accompanied by Lainie and Ilia.

Once Euphie was close enough, we reached out to press our fingertips together and pushed our foreheads close.

With that, Euphie pulled away. That was all that needed saying, and she seemed perfectly happy. We had already spoken at length before leaving the detached palace, and nothing else needed to be said between us. Except—

"Right, Euphie," I said, stopping her. "Hold out your hand."

"…? Yes?"

I gently placed a small object into her palm.

Ilia quickly recognized it for what it was and stared back wide-eyed. "Lady Anisphia, is that…?"

"Yep. A key to my workshop. Only you and I have copies," I said to Ilia.

"…This is for me?" Euphie whispered.

"I want you to have it. Most of my memories are in that workshop, so I want you to look after it until I come back."

Euphie's gaze seemed to bore into the key as her lips slowly curled into a beaming smile.

With a small nod, she folded her hands around it and finally spoke.

"I'll take good care of it," she said warmly.

"Yep. It's almost time for me to go."

"Yes. Take care," she said reluctantly, stepping back.

Ilia, meanwhile, was standing next to her in a daze.

"…Ilia? What's wrong?"

"…Ah. No, it's nothing."

"It doesn't look like nothing. What's the matter? Are you okay?"

"…I'm just surprised you gave up the key to your workshop…," she answered, eyes downcast as she raised a hand to her chest.

Right. She usually wore her own key tied to a string around her neck.

Maybe she considered it a symbol of the special relationship that existed between us. In that case, it was little wonder it came as

a shock that I had handed mine over to Euphie.

With that thought, I couldn't stop myself from saying what came next.

"Ilia?"

"Yes?"

"Be happy. Thank you for sticking with me all this time."

She was my closest ally, my best friend. Practically an older sister.

But we had both changed, and we had both found people who meant the world to us. Our roles and duties were taking us to distant places.

If someone had told me years ago that this was what the future had in store for me, I wouldn't have believed them. Ilia, no doubt, would have found it even more preposterous. But here we were—and in my mind, it was an incredibly positive change.

At that moment, a tear rolled down Ilia's cheek.

"Huh?!" I cried out. "I-Ilia?! What's wrong?!"

"…Hmm? Oh. I'm crying…" Surprised by her own response, she gently raised a hand to her cheek to wipe away her tears.

Then she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, took a deep breath to calm herself, and gave me a gentle smile. "Lady Anisphia. I'm so happy to have shared these past years with you."

"…It's not like this is goodbye forever, though," I pointed out.

“All the same, I want you to know. Please don’t push Charnée or Priscilla too hard, all right?”

“Of course not.”

“And don’t push yourself too hard, either.”

“I know, I know.”

We had had this exchange countless times over the years. This time, however, it wasn’t quite the same. Ilia’s hand had tentatively been reaching toward me.

For a moment, she withdrew it in apparent confusion before timidly reaching out again.

After I accepted it, she embraced me in a gentle hug. I wrapped my arms around her in turn.

“…Yes, I’ll miss you,” she murmured.

“…But it’s just for a little while. I’ll see you again soon,” I reassured her.

“All the same, this marks a turning point.”

“Yeah. Let’s both do our best.”

“Yes. I’ll be awaiting your return, no matter how long it takes,” she said gently. This was as open as I’d ever seen her.

Having known her as long as I had, I could see that she really had changed—and I was delighted to see it.

While I was giving her a hug, Lainie rushed over, looking slightly flustered. Only then did Ilia let go.

Lainie was so fast that I was almost taken aback, while Ilia herself acted as if nothing had happened.

As I sighed, Lainie approached. “Take care, Lady Anis. And please give my best to my father.”

“Of course. You look after Euphie and Ilia, Lainie.”

“Yes. Leave it to me.”

Even though I knew I wouldn’t be gone for long, my chest was still buzzing with anticipation and anxiety. But I’d said all my goodbyes to those I cared about, so I rested a hand on my chest to calm my racing heart and looked to the sky.

“Let’s get going!”

We were headed to a new land. My dreams were still coming to life as we set off on this new journey.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I thought I could hear the sounds of birds singing freely, soaring high in the clear blue sky.

CHAPTER 5
Onward to a New Land

Outside the carriage window, the countryside passed by like a slow-moving river. The change was *so* slow, however, that I soon found myself at the end of my rope.

"I'm bored…," I muttered under my breath.

"There's still a while before our next rest stop," Priscilla answered mechanically.

"I know, I know."

Yes, I understood full well that we weren't going to stop again anytime soon, but hearing her say that out loud only made me feel even worse.

"U-um… What would you like to talk about?" Charnée asked, no doubt trying to be considerate.

She was acting almost like an adorable little animal, so I decided to go along with her, hoping that it might liven the air a little.

"All right, then, let's ask about each other. I already know you fairly well, Charnée, after our stay at your family's estate, but I don't know a whole lot about you, Priscilla."

"You want to talk about *me*?" she asked.

"We've never really spoken about personal things, have we?"

Well, given Priscilla's single-minded devotion to Euphie, it was difficult to get too close to her. I was curious why she admired Euphie so much.

"Very well…" She nodded slowly. "Where should I begin?"

"What about your background? What's life like in the Socerror family?"

"We're an ordinary viscount-level family based in the west of the kingdom. We're neither particularly outstanding nor in danger of decline. We're simply dull. There isn't much else to say."

"O-oh…?"

She was being awfully harsh. Did Priscilla dislike her family, perhaps?

The next moment, she gave me a smile—a grim, frightening kind of smile.

"I know what you're thinking. I'm just not particularly attached

to my family. I don't dislike them, per se."

"Don't go reading my mind…"

"You're very easy to read, Your Highness. Subtle communication isn't your strong suit."

"Ugh. I know that. I don't need you pointing it out to me."

No, I wasn't particularly adept at the subtleties of polite communication—nor at socializing more generally. So much as I could help it, I would prefer to avoid it altogether.

"Let's get back to the main topic," Priscilla suggested. "My family has somewhat unique circumstances, you might say."

"I think every noble family has their own problems…"

"It's my fervent hope that my biological father suffers a horrible death."

"Where did *that* come from?! And you said you didn't hate them?!"

This Priscilla was nothing if not unpredictable! But while I gave her a stern glare, she kept on going as if nothing had happened.

"Indeed. As for my father, Queen Euphyllia removed him as head of my family. He fully deserved it. I despise him so much I wish I could tell him he got his just deserts," she said without a moment's hesitation.

"Whoa, that's some animosity…"

Her demeanor was so calm it only made her more frightening. A cold whirlwind seemed to have filled the carriage, with Priscilla at its center.

"U-um… What happened between you and him…?" Charnée asked nervously.

Priscilla let out a small breath. Turning to stare out the window, she muttered, "I'm an illegitimate child."

"Ah… I—I didn't know."

"It's true. He got my mother pregnant and saw to my education, but he never showed any real interest in me. He wouldn't even recognize me as his own while I served the family as a maid. I'm sick and tired of him."

All I could do was let out a low groan. Charnée, meanwhile, was paralyzed with shock.

Sadly, there were more than a few nobles in the same boat. I hadn't known Priscilla was the victim of such misfortune.

It was partly because of cases like this that Euphie had devoted so much effort into enforcing strict discipline among the

aristocracy. Allowing behavior like that to slide would only widen the rift between the nobility and the common folk.

"Fortunately, my half brother is the new family head and a decent man. Not only did he take the reins of my family from that man I hesitate to call my father, he guaranteed my position as a young lady of noble birth."

"I see… I'm glad your brother is a good person, at least."

"Yes, I have no complaints there. But my father never once looked me in the eye. He kept me locked up out of fear of causing a scandal and paid no notice whatsoever to the fact that I was serving the family as a maid. Compared to him, my brother is decent enough."

"…To be honest, your father sounds like a scumbag," I said softly.

"I'm pleased to see we're in agreement."

I wasn't sure if it was because I had learned from my parents' mistakes or if it was just my natural predisposition, but hearing about Priscilla's circumstances only reinforced how grateful I was to have her on my side.

She seemed very cold while talking about her father, but when the conversation turned to her brother, she gave off a slightly warmer air.

"Huh? But in that case, why did you sign up as a maid at the detached palace?" Charnée asked, tilting her head to one side.

"My brother wanted to officially recognize me as his sister, but after everything that happened, I was more interested in dedicating myself to Queen Euphyllia than in living as a noblewoman."

"So that's why you adore Euphie so much…"

In essence, Priscilla regarded Euphie as her savior.

No wonder she was so loyal…

"My mother was of common blood, and hers was a hard life. I admire you, too, Princess Anisphia, for all the work you've done trying to improve the lot of everyday people."

"Are you just saying that to cheer me up?"

"In terms of beauty and devotion, Queen Euphyllia is indeed one step ahead. But if she is to have a favorable impression of me, it's important that I earn your favor, too, Your Highness. Which is why I want to serve you with all my heart. Please keep me by your side."

"…How am I supposed to respond to that?"

What exactly was I supposed to say when she sat there openly saying she preferred Euphie over me and was getting along with me only to get on Euphie's good side?!

Was it Priscilla's peculiar upbringing that had lent her such a dubious character? I was kind of curious to see what her supposedly normal brother was like…

"I know it's shameful of me, failing to hide my true intentions for seeking to gain your trust."

"You should have listed your openness as one of your special talents…"

"I'm honored!"

"That wasn't a compliment…"

Priscilla's attitude, I hadn't failed to notice, was a lot like Ilia's —and like with Ilia, I was at a loss for how to respond to her.

I didn't sense any malice in her, and so long as I overlooked her comments, she was an extremely capable secretary. But when it came to that strong personality of hers, all I could do was breathe a tired sigh.

"May I ask you a question of my own?" Priscilla said next.

"Me?"

"Yes. I would appreciate any guidance you could give on how to meet Queen Euphyllia's expectations."

"…Euphie likes people who take their jobs seriously."

"Then as my first step toward serving Her Majesty, I shall support you wholeheartedly."

"Oh, okay… Good luck, I guess?"

"Do you have any questions for Her Highness, Charnée?" Priscilla asked.

"Eeep! M-me?! N-not really…!"

"That won't do. You won't win Princess Anisphia's heart with such a modest attitude. She may seem approachable, but she keeps high walls around her emotions, so you need to work to gradually lower her guard through casual opportunities like this."

"Hey. You don't discuss your strategy for attacking someone when they can hear you."

"Ugh… I slipped up…!"

"You're not *acting* like you slipped up…"

"…Pfft! Ha-ha-ha! You're so weird, Priscilla!" Unable to help herself any longer, Charnée burst out laughing.

Priscilla's eyes warmed at this—and when her gaze met mine,

she raised a finger to her lips and winked.

Maybe she was trying to help relieve Charnée's anxieties.

She had a strange way of showing she cared, but Priscilla was attentive to those around her in her own way.

Before I knew it, I was smiling, too. Yes, I could see why Ilia had chosen them both to accompany me. When we returned to the capital, I would have to give her a sign of my appreciation.

At any rate, this lively chat had helped to relieve the tedium of our long carriage ride.

* * *

"Hmm… We're here!"

After finally arriving at the planned site for the new city, I moved to stretch my stiff body.

"Watch your manners, Your Highness," Priscilla cautioned me.

"We've been cooped up in here for so long! I'm aching all over. Come on, let me stretch a little."

"I'm afraid there are people around."

"…Fine, fine. I know," I said vaguely, gazing out at the ongoing construction efforts.

The planned construction site was on a gentle hill located next to a wide river. With the help of our magic users, the walls were rapidly taking shape, formed by piles of neatly stacked rocks.

"All right! I'm going to pull up the earthen wall, so step back, everyone!" someone called.

A mud wall began to bulge up, slowly taking form like a piece of massive clay. That mound was meant as the foundation and would soon be covered in stone.

While watching the workers carrying out their tasks, I called out to Navre, who was standing nearby at the head of our escort.

"Navre! That's the advance group of knights, right?"

"It is. I believe they've divided into groups, one working to erect the houses and walls, another guarding the perimeter, and another thinning out nearby monster hordes."

"I'm surprised the walls have come so far so quickly."

"The knights who received the strongest recommendations from their ministry instructors were sent out first. If anyone needed proof

we can achieve considerable results in a short period of time with the help of magic, this is it."

"I'll have to thank Lang when we're back in the capital."

I was confident in my own knowledge of magic, but when it came to its practical application, I was no match for the Ministry of the Arcane. All the more so if I had to educate others on its usage. There had been some doubt back in the capital over the use of magic in construction, but once we reported our progress here, no doubt those voices would sing a different tune.

While I relished this feeling of accomplishment, a new figure started walking our way—Baron Cyan in his knight uniform.

"You've had a long journey, Commander Anisphia," he said in greeting. "We've been awaiting your arrival."

"Baron Cyan… I mean, Lieutenant Commander Dragus. Thank you for overseeing everything here."

We welcomed one another with formal knight bows, then broke out into laughter. Clearly neither of us was used to these fancy titles and positions we had found ourselves saddled with.

"Frankly, my title seems too much. I don't feel I've earned the privilege…"

"That goes for both of us. We'll just have to get used to these fancy titles. Anyway, let's get right to it. I want to check the situation on-site, if we could."

"You should get some rest first. Our scouts will be back by sunset, so we can discuss specifics after dinner. Let me show you to our base of operations."

With that, my second-in-command led us to a rugged fort.

The interior was bleak, not at all like what I was expecting from the outside, but it was more than adequate for a fort in a settlement just starting out. After briefly inspecting the building, we arrived at a room somewhat larger than those in other forts I had visited in the past.

"These will be your chambers, Commander Anisphia," Dragus said. "They may not be entirely suitable to your royal station, but it's the best we could muster at short notice…"

"We've only just started construction, so you won't hear any complaints from me. Besides, I'm not here as royalty. I want you all to treat me as one of your own."

"Very well. Nonetheless, you *are* our leader. We'll treat you with all the respect that position warrants," he said with a wry grin.

I responded with a wave of my hand in silent agreement.

"If you need anything, please let me know. I'll have someone come and get you when it's time for dinner."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Commander," I answered.

With one final bow, Dragus turned to leave.

After watching him go, I turned my attention to Priscilla and Charnée, who hadn't left my side since our arrival.

"All right. I suppose we should start by organizing the luggage, huh?"

"Indeed," Priscilla answered. "We can't expect luxury in a pioneer settlement, but we still need to make this room suitable for the Royal Sister."

"So long as it keeps the wind and rain off, I don't need much, you know?"

"As Lieutenant Commander Dragus said, you must be afforded treatment commensurate with your status, Your Highness. Otherwise, you would set a poor example for those below you."

"Ngh. Enough nitpicking. I get it…"

"I'm glad you understand. Let's get started, Charnée."

"Of course!" Charnée answered enthusiastically as the two started organizing my belongings.

Just when we had finished unpacking, we received word that dinner was ready, and so we made our way to the dining hall.

Dragus had arrived ahead of us. No sooner did I set foot in the room than a servant pulled out a chair for me.

"Thank you for waiting. It might not be much, but I hope you enjoy it," Dragus said.

"I don't mind. So long as there's meat, I'm happy."

"Well, there's no shortage of monsters around these parts."

The meal was a distinctive shade of brown—meaning there was meat, and lots of it. Even the soup was loaded with it. This was a meal to fill the stomachs of knights constantly having to rely on physical strength.

"Is this monster meat?" I asked.

"Yes. No matter how many we hunt, there's no end to them. There isn't a dull day round these parts."

"That sounds problematic. Is it affecting construction? Have there been any issues?"

"Nothing major. The knights are giving it their all. They were very enthusiastic about today's meal, seeing as you would be

joining us."

"Ah. I had better savor it, then," I said. I was grateful for the knights' generosity.

First came the meal, then tea—and finally, our discussion.

"So, Dragus, exactly how is construction coming along?"

"Smoothly, I'm happy to say. As I mentioned earlier, there have been no major problems. That being said, we're doing a lot of firsts here, so we could run into issues down the road. It's difficult to predict."

"Well, we won't run into difficulties without experimenting a little. Tell me about the projects that have already begun."

"As you wish."

Next, Dragus proceeded to provide a detailed progress report on the pioneering work.

Given the high frequency of monster attacks, the knights had been divided into teams to patrol the area and thin out the local monster hordes. The meat we had been served with today's dinner was simply a by-product of such efforts.

Fortunately, the magic users assisting with the construction work were highly motivated, and efforts were proceeding ahead of schedule. Morale was high, and the site itself was in good order, Dragus reported calmly. As far as I was concerned, there could be no better proof that everyone's efforts were bearing fruit.

"With the help of magical tools, each individual knight can do more on the battlefield than ever before, and should we suffer any serious injuries, we can quickly ferry the wounded to nearby villages via Airbike," Dragus remarked.

"That's a relief. It's easier to survive any injury when it's treated quickly." I nodded.

"Indeed. We also have the magic users assisting with construction to help if we come under attack. I think it's safe to say we're very well prepared."

"I'm relieved to hear things are going smoothly. We had better not get complacent, though. I'd like to hear any concerns you have, even minor ones."

"Well…if there's one thing on my mind, it would have to be how our knights risk exhaustion. Long hours of work could affect their combat readiness."

"That's true…"

While no time was being wasted erecting the walls with the

help of magic, our proximity to the river meant that the risk of coming under attack from monsters remained uncomfortably high.

So long as the knights remained on constant alert, they would inevitably tire. The site still wasn't safe, and the fort was incomplete, so it was natural for Dragus to be concerned.

"I believe the situation will improve once the foundations are firmly in place. As you noted, Your Highness, complacency can soon give way to outright carelessness if the work is too easy."

"As the authority here, I'd like to remain focused. But so long as there isn't any trouble, we also need to recognize our successes and not overwork ourselves. Right?"

"Indeed. Be constantly prepared, but not to the point it clouds your judgment."

"Once the work is properly underway, I'd like to make sure we have more entertainment and recreation options available," Navre remarked.

"You can say that again. I don't have anything against eating meat, but it would be nice to have something else every once in a while…," Garkie added.

"It's better than not having *anything* to eat, but we don't want people getting tired of eating the same thing all the time…" Charnée nodded.

She must have felt quite strongly about that last point, seeing as she had suffered through various food shortages in the past.

"I wish we could invite a trading company to help get our inventory stocked, but then there's the question of transportation," I noted.

"In that case, we should work in tandem with a local adventurers guild."

"Oh, you mean to protect the merchants? I guess that would also help stimulate the local economy."

"I'll compile a report on the surrounding villages and towns so you can work on a more detailed plan," Priscilla suggested.

"Thank you."

"You have an excellent secretary, Commander," Dragus said. "I myself find paperwork to be a huge chore. I wish I could find an assistant like yours."

"I'd like to work on cultivating new talent, if I can."

"Yes, let's make this city somewhere they can live with peace of mind," he added with a chuckle.

And so our conversation continued late into the evening.

* * *

The morning after our arrival, we set out immediately to conduct an on-site inspection.

"Starting today, we'll all be focusing on the development work! Let's do our best!" I called out to the others.

"Yes!" Charnée replied wholeheartedly.

"Got it!" Garkie added in a somewhat less formal manner.

Navre and Priscilla, meanwhile, remained perfectly composed. The contrast with the other two created a somewhat strange atmosphere.

"Charnée, Priscilla, you'll both be with me as my escorts and help if I need any secretarial work done."

"Right!"

"You can count on us."

"Navre, Garkie—your main job is to serve as my bodyguards. Navre, you may need to consult with Lieutenant Commander Dragus on things, so you can go talk to him when you have to."

"As you wish."

"Garkie, I want you to spend some time with the other knights and workers to see how they're all doing. Poke around and find out what the general attitude is and if there are any problems we should know about. They might not feel comfortable expressing complaints while I'm around. If anything comes up, report back to me."

"Understood!"

"Then let's get going! Time to move out!"

Thus we began our tour of the development site.

The carpenters and magic users, on noticing my presence, responded with cheerful greetings.

"Good morning, Princess Anisphia!"

"Morning!" I called back. "How's it all coming along?"

The workers called back with cheer.

"Flawlessly! Using magic, we're making quick progress! We'll have this city finished in no time!"

"I never dreamed I'd have the honor to work on something like

this! I'll give it everything I've got, I promise you that!"

"Don't push yourselves too hard, though, okay?"

We continued through the site, watching as more earthen walls were pulled out of the ground through magic to serve as the foundations for the perimeter wall and individual residences.

"It's an incredible sight…," Charnée whispered under her breath.

"It sure is… So why do I have this feeling in the pit of my stomach?" Navre looked around restlessly.

I peered into his face. "Are you still worried about relying on magic for construction?"

"Yes, but it's more a question of familiarity. I'm sure I'll get used to it in time."

"Precisely," Priscilla interjected. "You were brought up as a proper nobleman, Navre. My family, on the other hand, always treated me as a nuisance. I had to work as a maid—and I always used magic to help me do the laundry."

"You used magic to wash clothes?!"

"Thanks to that, my hands are as beautiful as ever," she said expressionlessly, wiggling her fingers.

Her face, her words, and her tone of voice were completely at odds.

"Ah, I see… You *do* have nice hands…" Navre sounded discouraged.

"On the frontier, we used to solve problems with magic, too," Garkie added.

"Maintaining one's dignity is important as a noble, but you do need to spare a thought for the creature comforts…," Charnée observed.

That was the finishing blow, and Navre cast his eyes to the ground. "…Hearing stories like yours makes me realize how blessed I've been…"

"Depending on their particular skills, adventurers who can use magic have been treated as simple jacks-of-all-trades. I guess the deciding factor is ultimately your environment and situation," I remarked.

"I wouldn't know what to do with too much freedom…"

"Indeed. We can rely on the instructors from the Ministry of the Arcane to provide an education, so we need to think about what it really means to be a magic user and promote new ideas."

Magic was useful, but we couldn't fall into the trap of thinking that it was the right answer for every issue—or worse, abuse it.

If people started believing that magic was everything, they would end up repeating the same tragedies that had taken place in the kingdom's history. We certainly didn't want to see any new factions emerge that felt they had the right to use magic however they pleased.

Magic was a reflection of people's desires and wishes—which was why it was absolutely necessary for us to forge a society in which it wasn't used for evil.

"Maybe one day cities built with magic will be perfectly normal… I think that would be my wish…," I whispered.

"Did you say something, Lady Anis?" Garkie asked.

"Ahem. No, nothing," I said, brushing his question aside before proceeding to our next location.

We were heading for the knights' quarters, set aside for off-duty knights to catch some time away from work. That being said, we had informed them in advance that I would be dropping by, so they were all lined up to welcome me.

"Commander Anisphia!"

"Good work, everyone. How is the work going? If any issues come up, feel free to talk to me about them. Even small ones."

"No major problems here! We've come under a few monster attacks, but they've been decreasing in frequency since we started thinning out their numbers."

"Would you say they've attacked you frequently?"

"Well… We encounter them often enough, but so far they haven't formed any large groups, and we haven't come across any particularly strong ones. You might say some of us are a little disappointed."

"You didn't have any trouble subduing them?"

"Not with the magical tools you provided for us, Commander!"

"Yes, we're not scared of monsters anymore!"

The knights were in high spirits, clamoring over each other to show off their strength and bravery.

I couldn't have been any happier to see how much my inventions were improving people's lives and well-being.

"That sounds great. You don't have any concerns after using them?"

"Well… Ever since I started using magical tools, I've become

more aware of the limits of my own mana."

"And it isn't easy wielding them as well as you do, Commander."

"Magical energy and the difficulty operating them… Those would vary from person to person, I suppose…," I murmured.

I could manipulate the shape of a Mana Blade at will, but I knew that most people found it much more difficult than I did.

But even so, that was a difficult problem to resolve. Ultimately, the individual in question would simply have to work hard to master the weapon.

"I think we need more practice to truly understand these magical tools."

"We train with them, but there's no substitute for actual combat experience. Some of the men ran out of magical energy in the heat of battle and couldn't keep their Mana Blades working."

"…I see. That *would* be a problem…"

"Without magical energy, Mana Blades aren't all that useful."

"In the end, it's your skill with a sword that matters!"

As the knights bantered among themselves, I sank deep into thought—the Mana Blade was one of my most adopted and reliable inventions. Without it, I wouldn't have been able to defeat the dragon, nor would the Arc-en-Ciel or the Celestial have ever been born.

But it didn't work perfectly for everyone, and while those issues might've seemed trivial at first, that didn't mean they would never lead to fatalities.

"…Now that I know it's a problem, there's got to be something I can do about it…," I murmured so softly that no one could overhear. I made up my mind to find a solution.

CHAPTER 6
New Trials

Several days had passed since our arrival at the development site, during which I was constantly reviewing reports sent my way by Lieutenant Commander Dragus.

Amid the sound of pages turning, Priscilla let out a feigned cough. “Isn’t it time you took a break, Your Highness? You’ve been reading those documents nonstop these past few days.”

“Yeah. I’ll take a breather when I feel like it. I’ll let you know when I need you.”

“…Do you have a fever?”

“A fever? I don’t feel sick, no.”

“…I see.” Priscilla breathed an unreadable sigh.

Her reaction caught me off guard for a moment, but I shifted my attention back to the report in front of me.

“…Does the food disagree with you, Commander?” Navre asked.

“For someone who always gets upset with me about being disrespectful, you certainly can be rude sometimes,” I shot back.

“I understand where Gark and Navre are coming from,” Priscilla continued. “Normally, Your Highness, you would be reluctantly skimming those reports while complaining to no end. But you’ve spent days engrossed in them. Clearly, something is amiss.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but your level of focus…is a little worrisome,” Navre added.

…What on earth were they all blabbering about?

I only answered them after I finished the report and put it down on the desk.

“I’ll be going back to the capital tomorrow for a short while. There’s something I need your help with, though.”

“What would that be?”

“Once we get back, I want you to go and find Tilty and Tomas. Once they hear I want to discuss something with them, they should hurry over.”

“Why them?”

“They’re both external advisors with the magicology lab. So I need to talk to them.”

I had arranged their registration as official advisors, as their advice was invaluable to the development of new magical tools.

“If you’re calling in those two, does that mean you have an idea for a new magical tool?” Navre asked.

“Yep. I’ve been reading Lieutenant Commander Dragus’s reports and talking to the people on the ground over the past few days, and it sounds like construction is going smoothly. We might as well take advantage of this lull to make some new magical tools to help the knights.”

“What exactly do you have in mind?”

“That’s just the question I was waiting for, Navre. It’s definitely something you’d be interested in. We can talk about it properly back in the capital.” I flashed him a cheerful grin.

* * *

Instead of making the long journey back to the capital by horse-drawn carriage, we traveled by Airbike, which meant that we could cover the distance within a single day.

As we arrived at the newly established landing area, the knights of the Royal Guard serving at the palace gathered to greet me with a formal welcome.

“Welcome back, Commander Anisphia.”

“I’m home. Just so you know, I’m still not used to being addressed that way.”

“Ha-ha. It will take time.”

“I hope it doesn’t take too long. Can you look after the Airdra and the Airbikes? Navre, you and the others can have the rest of the day off. I’ll see you all again tomorrow.”

“As you wish,” Navre answered.

“Me and Navre will stay here, then. See you later!” Garkie added as the two strolled away.

“Charnée, Priscilla, you can both have the day off, too. I’m going back to the detached palace.”

“Understood! See you tomorrow!” Charnée answered in her usual lively manner.

"…By your leave," Priscilla added stoically.

After seeing them all off, I made my way home.

Today was a day off for everyone, so the mere thought of spending it with Euphie at the detached palace made me want to run full tilt. I had to fight the urge as I entered the grounds.

"…Anis."

Just as I reached the entrance, a voice sounded from overhead.

As soon as I looked up, a shadow gently fell on me from above; I was embraced in a hug and almost thrown flat on my backside.

I knew this voice, this scent, this warmth—I couldn't possibly forget the person holding me tight.

"I'm home, Euphie."

"Welcome back, Anis," she whispered sweetly in my ear, unwilling to let go.

My cheeks loosened in a smile as I stroked her back.

It had been only a week, but I had missed her dearly. It had been painful, not having her by my side, reminding me of everything I still wanted, everything I still needed to do.

But perhaps that time apart had been even more difficult for her? I never expected her to leap down on me and cling to me like she was now.

"Did you miss me?" I asked.

Instead of answering, she tightened her embrace and pressed her cheek against mine.

That silent appeal almost made my heart skip a beat. How could pure joy be so painful to bear?

There was only one thing for it—I would have to play the role of the older one between us and pamper my beloved queen.

"Let's go up to the bedroom, Euphie," I suggested in an effort to appease her. "I just got back, so I need to get some rest."

"…Yes, let's," she answered, loosening her arms.

The next moment, however, my body seemed to float up from the floor. My eyes widened in surprise, and her perfectly proportioned face hovered in front of me once more.

Only then did I realize she had lifted me into the air.

"E-Euphie?!"

"I'm taking you to the bedroom, Anis."

"You're seriously going to carry me up there?!"

As if gravity had no sway over her, she took off into the sky with a light step. With her dazzling skill with magic, she leaped all

the way up to the window and straight into the room.

It took all I had just to remain upright in wide-eyed astonishment.

"…You're wicked. For a queen, you have no patience at all," I whispered.

"Today's my day off," she answered.

"Ngh! Put me down already! I was trying to pamper you, but I'm not rewarding *this*!"

"Really?"

She sat me down, leaning close to peer into my eyes.

Hers were full of tenderness, longing, and pain, piercing me through with an intensity of unspoken emotion.

It was unfair, but I couldn't stay angry before something so beautiful.

"Ugh…! I know you missed me, but you realize people might be watching…?"

"A lecture won't change how I feel, you know?"

"You realize *this* is why people criticize your personality, don't you?"

"It's true," she admitted unapologetically as she buried her face in my shoulder.

She rubbed her face against me like a spoiled kitten, wrapping her arms around my waist as if she would never let go.

"…You like to dote on others, don't you?"

"I missed you… Until this very moment, I was so terribly lonely…"

"If you're willing to go that far, I suppose I don't have any choice but to forgive you."

"Anis."

Euphie pushed her weight against me as she called out my name—sending us both crashing down onto the bed. There, she positioned herself on top of me and brought her face close to mine.

Our lips brushed as we pressed our foreheads together. Euphie remained in that position for a long moment, then rotated her body to lie down beside me.

Staring up at the ceiling, hands clasped together, we both burst into laughter for no reason at all.

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Ha-ha-ha!"

I started chuckling first, letting my true colors show, while

Euphie quickly followed suit, acting far more childish than usual.

How long did we lie there, staring up at the ceiling?

"How is the construction coming along?" Euphie asked after a long pause.

"Smoothly," I answered. "There haven't been any major problems, and morale is high. I feel great about it!"

"That sounds wonderful. Is Baron Cyan well?"

"Right as rain. He gave me a letter to pass along to Lainie."

"She's been very worried, so I'm sure that will come as a relief for her."

"I'll bet."

"…Do you think it'll work out?" Euphie asked.

"I'm not sure yet," I muttered, still staring up at the ceiling. "Everything's fine for the time being, but I can't be super optimistic. Given the location, there are plenty of monsters, and there's no telling if stronger ones will appear going forward."

"I see…"

"I'll keep giving it my all while I can. Early tomorrow, I'm going to call Tilty and Tomas to the lab for a meeting!"

Everything would be fine—or so I hoped she'd believe.

I had no idea why, but Euphie's expression turned suddenly forlorn. She closed her eyes, lightly puffing out her cheeks in a pout.

"…What's with that reaction?"

"I'm sulking because you're being so typically *you* right now."

"What's wrong with being true to myself?"

"…It's been so hard without you, and the moment you return you find things to do without me. It's so like you to just take flight once you've set your mind on something, but it does get on my nerves a little."

"…A little?"

"…Just a little."

"Really?"

"Are you trying to make me sulk for real now?"

"Ha-ha-ha. Sorry."

I couldn't hold back a light chuckle, but that only prompted Euphie to puff her cheeks out even more. Unable to help myself, I poked one of them.

Euphie reached out to take the hand that I had used to poke her and intertwined her fingers with mine. "I can't live without you. I

feel so jealous seeing that you would be fine without me."

"I wouldn't be able to do this without you, Euphie. It's because you set me free that all this is possible."

"…Don't you think it's unfair that I have to be lonely because I gave you the freedom to pursue your dreams?" she asked, pulling me close and giving me a teasing kiss.

Caught off guard, I felt my heart skip a beat at this sudden gesture.

I enjoyed seeing her in this weakened state, but she could be equally unfair, flustering me at the drop of a hat.

"How can I cheer you up, my adorable little queen?" I teased.

"…You could let me have you all to myself from now till tomorrow morning."

"At least give me time to eat and have a bath. And spare a thought for Ilia and the others. You can't just spirit me away."

"It's your fault for making me wait so long," she said, resting her head on my stomach to use it as a pillow.

The jolt surprised me, but seeing her lie that way, unmoving, called to mind a large dog seeking its owner's attention.

I wanted nothing more than to smother her in affection. She closed her eyes in contentment as I gently stroked her hair.

"…I knew you would say that."

"Don't worry. I'm honored that you're happy to show me your selfish side."

"Pat my head more, please." She buried her face in my stomach, surrendering to that neediness.

Maybe the strain of separation really had gotten under her skin. I thought we were both ready for this new chapter, but no doubt the reality had been much tougher than our expectations.

Even if it was just for a short time, perhaps Euphie found it difficult to carry the burden of ruling as queen while I wasn't around—not that she would ever admit that directly. It must have been hard, feeling completely powerless ever since our encounter with Lilana. Not that she truly was powerless, of course.

In any case, my job had to be to support her so she could do her absolute best.

"You're doing great, Euphie," I consoled her, gently stroking her head and running my fingers through her silky hair.

Euphie said nothing, and we remained that way until we lost track of time.

* * *

Euphie finally calmed down enough for me to go eat dinner and take a bath, but she never let me stray far.

She hardly ever left my side, and I couldn't help but notice the maids watching each time we crossed paths.

Unable to endure their stares any longer, I returned to my room, with Euphie still in tow.

Now she was holding me close from behind, her face buried in the nape of my neck. Her breath was ticklish, but it also awakened my pent-up frustration.

"Satisfied yet, Euphie?"

"…Not at all," she answered.

"Oh…?"

"By the way, you mentioned calling Tilty and Tomas over. What kind of magical tool do you have in mind this time?"

"Ah. Well, first, I was thinking of some kind of version of the Celestial we can manufacture in greater numbers."

"You want a mass-produced version?"

"We're going to have to change it around to cut costs, but I'd like to make something modeled on the swords our knights are used to wielding. The Mana Blade makes for an excellent backup weapon, but it's pretty much useless if the user exhausts their magical energy or if they never had much to begin with. I've heard some of the knights are finding them difficult to control."

"And you think a mass-market Celestial will solve that?"

"I mean, most of my knights are commoners. I don't think the Mana Blade is bad, by any means, but if there's a way to improve on it, I want to."

"Hmm… If that means we need more blacksmiths, we may need to make plans to increase hiring and training. Send me a report after your meeting, okay?"

"Yep. On top of that, I also want to work on a new magical sword, one not for mass production."

"A new magical sword?"

"Yes. That's why I need Tilty. I want to hear her thoughts on it."

"…*I'd* like to take part, too. But I can see that won't be possible," Euphie whispered forlornly.

I pressed back, leaning into her with my weight.

"…On a different note, I've been thinking about a few things," I began. "Like how I should carry myself and what I should do from now on, I guess."

"…Why?"

"I realized how heavy a responsibility it is, being a knight commander. Now I can see things only I can do in the role. Even when it feels too hard, when I wish I could hand the reins over to someone else, there are some things only I can achieve. I thought I knew that, but visiting the worksite opened my eyes."

The more conscious I was of my newfound position, the more conscious I was of my responsibilities. It was getting easier to imagine how difficult Euphie's life must be as queen.

No matter how many times I thanked her, it would never be enough. If I needed proof of her love for me, this was it. By comparison, I felt like I wasn't trying hard enough.

"Now that I've experienced it for myself, I realize how hard it must be for you as queen. Thank you, Euphie—for everything."

"I did it because I wanted to."

"Yeah… But you know? You can't have your way with *everything*."

"…I know."

"Even if you wanted it, I don't want to see you suffer. Especially if you chose this life because of me."

"But even if I did, it's the path I decided on. We both know that…"

"I know. You can be more selfish, you know?"

"…Selfish?"

"I'm doing what I love. You gave me the freedom to pursue my dreams, Euphie, and I couldn't be happier. But I want you to be happy, too. It's okay to think about yourself. Whatever you do, I'll forgive you."

Euphie hugged me tighter, enough to make her embrace slightly uncomfortable, and pulled me closer.

"…That *is* me being selfish. What I want is for you to be free."

"Yeah."

"But if you'll let me be a little *more* selfish… I want you to be free and to always come back to me. No matter what needs to be done, I'll endure. I'll give everything I can for you."

I placed a hand atop hers to quell the slight tremble in her

voice. Euphie laced her fingers through mine, as if beseeching me not to go. I felt my hand grow warm with our shared heat.

"Please… Let me have you all to myself. Give me a taste of that freedom I've given you," she murmured, her voice so faint that I only barely caught the sound of it. Her lips brushed up against my neck, and I wondered if I would feel teeth if I provoked her.

"Don't you remember?" I said, trying to soothe her anxieties. "I promised to give you everything. I'm glad you gave me this freedom, but I'd rather stay here with you than see you suffer."

"…But you cherish your freedom, Anis."

"Because it's the freedom *you* gave me. You wanted me to be free. It's because of your wish that I can embrace this freedom. If it ever becomes a burden for you, I'll gladly be your captive until you're ready to let me go again."

Euphie grabbed my hand, softly kissing my skin.

I adjusted my position so I could stare up at her.

It wasn't long before our gazes were as entangled as our fingers, pulling each other in as we pressed our lips together and I sank down into the bed.

Euphie was trembling ever so slightly as she pressed her face into my chest. After a moment, I heard a weak sniffle and felt a little dampness against my skin.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

"Says the one responsible for it."

"I wanted to comfort you."

"…I'm pathetic."

"I love you all the same."

"…You're so mean, Anis."

"I'm older than you, that's all. There, there. You can trust me. Your big sister is here to pamper you… Hold on! Ow!"

Just as I closed my eyes and patted her head, Euphie bit into my collarbone. The pain was so intense that I yelped, tears welling up in my eyes.

Her bite had been too forceful for mere play. When Euphie looked up, she fixed me with a sharp glare. There were still a few tears in her eyes, so she clearly hadn't finished pouting…

"I had no idea you could be so cruel. Have I given you too much freedom?"

"E-Euphie…?"

"Well, if you're the older one, maybe you should show more

restraint? Perhaps I should be the one doted on."

"Y-your smile is giving me the creeps…"

"I'll see for myself whether you meant any of what you said," Euphie deflected, wearing the brightest smile she had shown me all day.

I smiled back, but inside, I was shivering at this fierce whirlwind of emotion. My plans tomorrow, I suspected, wouldn't go entirely smoothly.

But there was a part of me that wanted to be fully open with her, to share my thoughts and worries, even to be the butt of her anger if need be.

So I took Euphie at her word.

"That's fine. The night is still young, after all." Smiling, I gently stroked her cheeks, watching as her eyes softened in pleasure.

That won't be enough, her expression was saying.

Try as I might, I couldn't stifle my laughter.

* * *

"Ah… Mm-hmm… Hey, Charnée, Priscilla… My voice isn't hoarse, is it?"

"…Did you catch a cold?" Charnée asked, tilting her head in concern.

There was a vague sense of discomfort in my throat, thanks to that hateful, lovable little queen of mine.

"I brought some throat lozenges, Your Highness. Please take one."

"…Thank you, Priscilla."

"Not at all. You must have had a burning fever last night," she answered.

"…? I don't remember feeling all that hot…"

Judging by her tone of voice, Priscilla had perhaps guessed the truth, but she was trying to protect the innocence of the other one with us.

I was supposed to have visitors, but I could hardly see them like this. I had to fight to regain my composure as I put the lozenge Priscilla handed me into my mouth.

"Are they already here?" I finally asked.

“Yes, they’re waiting for you, Your Highness.”

“I guess I’d better go, then,” I murmured, leaving with Charnée and Priscilla.

Our destination was the room I had been using as a makeshift office.

Garkie, Navre, Halphys, Tilty, and Tomas were already waiting inside.

“Good morning, Princess Anisphia,” Halphys said in greeting.

“Morning,” I answered. “There haven’t been any issues, I hope?”

“We’re fine here. Nothing has changed, though we’re as busy as ever…”

“I see. Thanks for coming, Tilty, Tomas.”

“…Of course,” Tomas responded.

He must have felt nervous, as he was even less talkative than usual. That was to be expected. He was the only non-noble among us, so it was natural he would feel uneasy.

Then came Tilty. For whatever reason, she fixed me with a mischievous smile.

“Well, aren’t you late, Anis. Did our dear queen not want to let you go?”

“…It took me a little longer to get ready this morning, that’s all.”

“Ohhh…? Well, I suppose that will do. And what brings you back here, summoning me at short notice so soon after setting out on your pioneering mission?”

“I know we’re all busy, so let’s get right down to it. The reason I asked Tomas and Tilty to join us is because I’m hoping to design a new magical tool.”

“You never change. Once an idea strikes your mind, you don’t let anything else get in your way,” Tomas remarked.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Also, like I’ve said before, it’s okay to speak freely here. That’s the whole point of being an external advisor. No one here is going to stand on ceremony.”

Right? I nudged the others, glancing at each of them in turn. No one raised any objections, though Navre pressed a hand to his forehead and breathed a deep sigh. I decided to ignore him.

“…All right. You’re saying we’re here to work on a new magical tool?” Tomas asked.

“Basically, I want a version of the Celestial that we can produce

en masse. I don't expect them to be as high quality as the Celestial itself, mind you."

"En masse… So you want to equip your knights with them?"

"The development work is going well, but we're facing frequent monster attacks. The knights are happy with the Mana Blades, but a good number of them have suggestions to improve the design. I think a mass-produced version of the Celestial, basically a new and improved Mana Blade, would make everyone happy."

"Hmm… The Mana Blade does have its merits, but it takes a good amount of time to master. And of course, it won't work if you run out of magical energy to power it. The Celestial can also be used as a physical sword, so I can see the advantages to it being distributed to the knights."

"We've already made the Celestial, so it shouldn't be too difficult, right?"

"Now hold on a minute," Tilty interjected.

"…Yes?"

I glanced over at her, unsure why she had interrupted. For the longest moment, however, all she did was stare back at me.

Her expression was sharper than usual, and my breath hitched.

At last, she exhaled quietly before speaking up. "I understand what you're aiming at. But are you really sure about this?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you were against using magical tools as weapons? Forgetting the Mana Blade, the Arc-en-Ciel, and the Celestial, that is."

"…Well…"

"I know why you feel that way. That's why I'm asking you this now," she said, narrowing her eyes.

I clammed up, and the room slowly descended into an unbearable state of tension.

Eventually, Charnée could contain herself no longer. "U-um… What's wrong with making magical tools to be used for fighting? There must be a reason if you've been avoiding it, Lady Anis…"

"Because it would be too dangerous," Navre answered for me.

Charnée glanced back at him, no doubt hoping he would elaborate, but it was Halphys who stepped in.

"Magical tools are incredibly useful, and even commoners can use them. In fact, many of Princess Anisphia's magical tools are already improving people's daily lives. Only a very small number of

them are clearly meant to be used as weapons—the Mana Blade, the Celestial, and Queen Euphyllia's Arc-en-Ciel. Why do you think that is?"

"…Is the fact that they're weapons a problem?" Charnée asked.

"Precisely. Most of the magical tools invented thus far were meant to help people, but they can pose considerable danger in the wrong hands."

"Think about it in light of Lady Anis's past reputation. What would happen if she distributed weapon-type magical tools among the common people?" Tilty asked.

"…If they were distributed carelessly, we could end up with a rebellion," Navre muttered gravely.

Charnée's breath caught. "Oh my! A r-rebellion…?!"

“Charnée, yes? Are you really so surprised?” Tilty asked, her tone grave.

“…I—I…!” Charnée seemed about to say something, then just weakly shook her head.

With the atmosphere growing increasingly oppressive, it was Tomas who hesitantly broke the silence.

“…Lots of people in the lower classes have lost their families at the hands of oppressive nobles. There are people who hate them simply for being what they are. If they got their hands on weapons, I wouldn’t be surprised if they started thinking about revenge.”

“…I had no idea…,” Charnée whispered through gritted teeth.

“…Well…,” Tomas said flatly.

“It isn’t only commoners who are unhappy, you know?” Garkie pointed out. “There have been all sorts of arguments between local aristocratic families in central and regional areas. There could be a conflict even without commoners getting involved.”

“Garkie’s right,” I said with a nod. “If we freely distributed magical tools that were designed to be weapons, we’d have to be prepared for *anyone* to use them. The common people would have access to magic, while nobles who already know magic would have even more resources at their disposal. Power breeds ambition, and all it takes is for someone to be swayed by the darkness in their heart.”

“So that’s why you’ve refrained from building weapons, Your Highness?” Priscilla asked.

I nodded. “…Yeah. I used to have a rotten reputation, and my social position was no better. If I had started making weapons en masse, I would have been accused of treason. The only reason people went along with the Mana Blades was because I originally designed them for self-defense.”

“There must have been some nobles who would have liked to get rid of Commander Anisphia,” Navre noted. “Now that Queen Euphyllia is ushering in reforms and has acknowledged the utility of magical tools, people are beginning to accept them, but there’s still a risk even the slightest misstep could plunge the realm into turmoil.”

“Navre hit the nail on the head,” Tilty began. “If you make weapon-type magical tools, everyone will want them. That’s why

you need to be absolutely sure of this—all of you. Do you really think this is a good idea, Anis?" she asked, peering into my soul.

Everyone stood there expectantly.

I had to take a deep breath and place a hand on my chest to calm myself before answering.

"I think they can give people the power to build a better future. I *want* people to reach for a better future. This new city development is the first step to doing that, and I want to guarantee its success."

"You'll devise new weapons to empower your knights even knowing they could be misused? I hope you realize it'll be too late for regrets once people start going helter-skelter with them," Tilty pointed out.

"Yep. I know the risks," I declared, doing my best to flash everyone a determined smile.

"If you're willing to go that far, then go ahead," Tilty said with a deep sigh. "You only ever see the good in people."

"I'm not doing this out of the goodness of my heart. I'm doing it for the kingdom."

"Yes, yes. You're an upstanding royal now, I see." Waving her hands in front of her face, Tilty evidently wasn't amused.

The next moment, however, she turned her sharp eyes on everyone else. "You understand this, I hope? Anis always sees the good in people, and she absolutely adores magic, but she also knows the risk in letting just anyone use it. That also doesn't stop her from pursuing her dreams, even if they don't turn out the way she's expecting. So hear this—if any of you betray those dreams of hers, you'll have me to answer to."

"Tilty!" I exclaimed. "You don't need to threaten anyone…"

"Shut up for a minute, Anis. The rest of you, if you're going to serve Anis, you had better be up to it. You had better understand she's pouring herself into magicology, and you had better not betray her or jeopardize the future she's trying to build. Make sure you're well aware just how determined she is in coming to you with this request."

"Of course we understand. I'll support Her Highness to the best of my ability and keep our inventions from being put to evil use," Halphys answered proudly.

Navre and the others nodded along in agreement.

After peering into their souls one by one, Tilty at last breathed

a tired sigh and closed her eyes. “If you’re ready, then, I won’t raise any more objections.”

“…Sorry, Tilty. And thank you,” I said.

“Hmm. I wasn’t fishing for gratitude,” she said with a snort, turning away and crossing her arms.

She was as prickly as ever, but my heart went out to her as I thought about how she had said all that for my sake.

“So? There’s something else you want besides more Celestials, isn’t there?” Tilty asked.

“…What makes you think that?”

“If you just wanted to mass-produce something you’ve already made, Tomas alone would have been enough. The fact that you went out of your way to call me here must mean there’s more to this meeting, no?”

“Right,” I answered with a light chuckle.

Tilty’s lips formed a curious grin. “So what’s the occasion?”

“I was thinking about making another weapon-type magical tool, different from a sword this time. I wanted to ask for your help…”

“You had *another* weapon in mind? What kind?”

“First, I thought maybe we could make a magical sword out of artificial magicite.”

“Artificial magicite—like what you used in those royal robes that Your Highness and Queen Euphyllia have?” Priscilla asked.

“That’s right. The artificial magicite used in those was designed for flying, but theoretically, you could incorporate other types of magic, too.”

“You’re saying you want to make a sword that can do things like that?!” Charnée was startled—and she wasn’t alone.

Tilty was the only member of the group to take this calmly, resting a hand under her chin as she fell to thinking.

“Hmm. I see,” she said with an intrigued smile. “That *should* be possible, yes.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Tilty. Basically, I’m hoping Halphys can help research what we’d need to do,” I said.

“Me?!” Halphys exclaimed, her eyes widening in surprise as she pointed to her own face.

“I’m counting on you as my representative in the capital.”

“But I…!”

“Also, I was impressed by that private research paper you wrote

recently. I'm confident I can leave this to you."

"Huh?!"

"Ah, *that* paper," Tilty chimed in. "I read it, too, you know? If you can come up with ideas like that, you're certainly ready to fill Anis's shoes."

"Lady Tilty…!"

Tilty's praise only added to Halphys's distress.

In the midst of this exchange, Navre raised an uncertain hand into the air. "Um, what exactly was this paper about? And what does it have to do with making a new magical sword?"

"I'm interested in Halphys's research area, so I often ask her to let me take a look at her work," I explained. "And I thought her latest ideas might be helpful in making a magical sword."

"Whoa. I knew you were up to something, but I had no idea Lady Anis was singing your praises!" Garkie remarked.

"I-it isn't all that impressive…," Halphys stammered in embarrassment.

Priscilla, no doubt new to this discussion, turned my way. "What was the paper about?"

"Hmm. It's going to take a bit of time to explain, so I guess I should start with the conclusion first," I answered with a faint smile as everyone turned to me expectantly.

"What I want to make is a magical tool based on *real* magicite."

I clapped my hands to get everyone's attention, rousing them from their state of speechless shock.

"Now, I know you all probably have a lot of questions," I said.

"Of course we do. Magicite doesn't have many practical applications. I'm sure everyone is surprised… And that includes me," Tilty admitted.

"I'm not very familiar with magicite. What kind of uses does it have?" Charnée asked.

"I'll explain, but make sure you don't share any of this outside this group," I warned everyone.

Charnée quickly put a hand over her mouth before nodding in agreement.

The others likewise nodded. They all understood the importance of what I was about to tell them.

"We should do this in order, so maybe you should start, Halphys?" I suggested.

"I-it's still a work in progress, though…"

"It's all related, and it's necessary for the discussion about using magicite. If you don't mind?"

"…Very well. I've been conducting my own research, with some input from Princess Anisphia and Queen Euphyllia."

"I remember you mentioning your own private work a few times," Garkie murmured, perhaps sensing where this was leading.

Halphys nodded in confirmation. "My goal was to find a pure and simple form of magic, independent of the skill of the user."

"…What do you mean?"

"Traditional magic is all about individual skills and aptitudes, so the same technique can manifest differently depending on who uses it, right? So I wanted to come up with something pure, simple, that removes individual aptitudes from the equation. I started by analyzing existing forms of magic."

"…In other words, you're trying to get to the basest form of magic? Like the foundations underpinning it?" Navre asked.

"Yes, that's exactly right," Halphys answered.

Garkie tilted his head to one side as if he didn't quite follow,

while Navre let out an impressed sigh.

Uncovering the simplest, most fundamental form of magic—that was Halphys's research goal.

"Establishing a system of magic unaffected by skill or technique. I thought it was an intriguing idea, which is why Euphie and I offered up advice where we could," I explained.

"It isn't yet a fully formed theory… We're still in the process of validating it," Halphys added.

"Still, it's paying off. It's certainly worth all the time you've put into it."

Traditional magic was inevitably at the whim of individual talents and aptitudes, and conventional teaching methods were based around praying to spirits and studying their natures so as to better visualize how to manifest them.

But there were always those who simply couldn't master such an approach. Halphys was a typical example, and after learning about magicology, she started to harbor doubts about the conventional system of magic.

It all stemmed from her lack of skill in traditional magic. To her, magical tools must have seemed like a revelation.

"Lady Anis's magical tools are essentially a form of magic that exhibits stable performance regardless of the user, wouldn't you agree?"

"…I suppose that's true."

"So I started wondering whether magic that doesn't rely on the skill of the user would be any different from that activated with magical tools."

"I was taught that magic is only as powerful as your imagination, but you seem to have the opposite view, Lady Halphys," Priscilla said, calmly assessing this quick rundown.

Indeed, Halphys's vision for a new system of magic was based on ideas antithetical to conventional wisdom.

Rather than laboring to master magic, her approach was all about reducing it to the bare essentials.

"I don't think the old ways are wrong, per se. But there are people who can't master magic with those methods. If magic could be learned from the most fundamental basics, more people might be able to use it."

"I see… I'm not very good at using magic, either. Now you've got me wondering if the problem was all in how I was taught,"

Garkie murmured.

I let out a soft chuckle. “Everyone visualizes magic in their own way. I think an approach that yields the same results regardless of who activates it would be very intriguing.”

“…I see.” Navre nodded, impressed. “Even the simplest magic techniques can have dramatically different effects once mastered. Take the Mana Blade, for instance. It relies on simple magic to generate a blade of raw energy, but Commander Anisphia is capable of freely altering its shape. You’re saying it would be possible to do that sort of thing with magic?”

“The basics are important, you know? You might say that today’s magic isn’t as refined as it could be at the foundational level,” Halphys noted.

The others all turned back to her, watching on with newfound respect.

Thrown off guard by this acknowledgment, Halphys feigned a cough. “I believe it’s difficult to achieve a shared understanding with traditional teaching methods, which leads to ambiguities and misunderstandings. So rather than rely on the traditional prayer-based approaches passed down through the generations, I would like to establish a more scientific system of magic derived from magicology. That’s my dream.”

“It’s a heretical idea, all right. There’s no mistaking Anis’s influence. Yep, there’s never a dull moment around here,” Tilty said with a huge grin. She was clearly enjoying herself.

Halphys leaped back in alarm, meeting Tilty’s intense gaze with a strained smile.

“Others may call it heresy, but Halphys isn’t trying to deny conventional forms of magic,” I pointed out. “She isn’t saying that the methods passed down through history are wrong. Her dream is to devise a parallel system through which anyone can master magic.”

“Th-that’s right…” She nodded.

“It all depends on how you feel about it. As for me, I can’t wait to sit down and enjoy a cup of tea while watching those spiritualist traditionalists seething over,” Tilty quipped.

“Yes, yes, you have depraved tastes, I know. Now, back to what I was saying. Halphys and I discussed the extent to which magic could be simplified and all the various factors that play a role in creating different phenomena. That’s when we came to an

interesting realization."

"Interesting?" Charnée murmured, head tilted to one side.

I let out a low chuckle, turning to Halphys. "Would you like to explain, Professor Halphys?"

"Ugh… I'm still trying to validate my theory… And please don't call me Professor…"

"I know it's hard to fully explain, but we *are* getting closer to the truth. I feel it in my bones. Go ahead. Consider this an order from a royal princess."

"…Very well." Halphys sighed, repositioning her glasses with one finger. After pausing for a moment to catch her breath, she looked up at everyone gathered around. "As I said just before, I've been working on simplifying and streamlining magical techniques. Through those efforts, I arrived at certain questions, as well as a hypothesis."

"What sort of questions?" Charnée asked.

"The basic premise of traditional magic is that we're working with the blessings of the spirits, and that without the spirits, magic simply would not exist."

"Well, that's just common sense?" Navre opined.

"I had my doubts about that. Have you ever considered that there are certain types of magic that don't quite correspond to the attributes of various spirits?"

"…Magic that doesn't match a spirit's attributes?" Charnée tilted her head in confusion.

"Attributeless magic, in other words?" Navre pondered, his chin resting on his hand.

"Ah. I guess spells to boost your physical abilities or generate a magical blade don't really fall under fixed categories, right? Now that you mention it, there are probably a lot of spells like that," Garkie noted as he crossed his arms.

At this, Halphys breathed a long sigh, adjusting her glasses yet again.

"…So do you all sense the presence of these so-called attributeless spirits?"

…Just like that, the room fell silent. I thought I was gonna go crazy waiting for someone to speak, but fortunately, Tomas voiced

his thoughts first.

"…Maybe I don't really understand, seeing as I'm not a noble… but don't all spirits have specific attributes?"

"That's just the thing. It seems like a huge blind spot, right?" I said jokingly, but the others were still reeling.

"…It's true, I've never sensed any spirits without an elemental attribute."

"Me neither."

"I can't say I have…"

"Now that you mention it…neither have I."

"Yes," Halphys continued. "Those of us born into the nobility can sense the presence of spirits—but there's no such thing as a spirit without an elemental attribute."

The cornerstones of the spirit world were said to be the primordial powers of light and darkness, as well as the four great elements of fire, wind, earth, and water, from which other variations were derived.

There was no room in that cosmology for spirits without innate characteristics. Euphie had once said that it was the natural way of things for spirits to be attributed to one element or another.

"What, then, is attributeless magic?" Halphys asked. "According to Princess Anisphia's theories, magic is the result of spirits transforming when we impose our will on them. And yet non-elemental magic exists, even though we cannot perceive the presence of any non-elemental spirits."

"…I suppose that's true," Navre muttered under his breath.

"Does that mean spells to boost your strength *aren't* magic…? I mean, they have to be… Right…?" Garkie glanced around, growing more confused by the second.

Indeed, there were few who could face this revelation without being shaken up by it, at least to some degree. The only members of our group who seemed unfazed were Tomas, who looked like he had no idea what was going on, and Tilty, grinning madly in response to everyone else's panic.

No doubt everyone had overlooked this simple fact because they took magic and sensing the presence of spirits for granted.

Taking another perspective, one could find spirit stones that lacked elemental attributes of their own, but there was no such thing as a non-elemental spirit. How were we supposed to explain those conflicting facts? I suspected the others were all asking more

or less the same thing.

"One theory is that neutral spirit stones somehow lost their original elemental attributes. But then, *how* exactly did they lose them? No. Personally, I think there must be another explanation," Halphys continued.

"This was when Halphys came to me as an expert in magicology, and to Euphie as a spirit covenantor. Euphie has an intuitive understanding of these things now, but there are still a lot of things we ought to formally verify…," I added.

"That's why I haven't announced anything yet, so please keep what I'm about to tell you strictly confidential." With this preamble out of the way, Halphys paused to clear her throat. "In short, what we recognize as a non-elemental magic doesn't correspond to magic as defined by conventional classifications."

"Conventional classifications…?"

"What does that mean?"

"Magic is the result of spirits transforming into various phenomena, but just because certain spells or techniques lack elemental attributes doesn't necessarily mean there are non-elemental spirits."

"But it's still magic, right?"

"People think of it as such, but we believe that it's actually quite different from elemental magic. Yes, it is indeed magic, but strictly speaking, it isn't the same *kind* of magic," I added to clarify.

To work, magic required the presence of a practitioner and a spirit to function as the medium.

All creatures in this world contained spirits within souls. When those inner spirits resonated with others floating in the environment, the external spirits would transform in accordance with the practitioner's—thus triggering what we regarded as magic.

According to this system, there was no such thing as a non-elemental spirit, so it should have been impossible for non-elemental magic to exist.

"What *is* neutral magic…?" Navre wondered aloud.

"This is where Halphys's research on devising a more streamlined system comes in. Basically, non-elemental magic, like what's used in the Mana Blade, doesn't actually transform spirits to produce its effect—it manipulates raw magical energy itself."

"…Raw magical energy?" Navre's eyes widened in astonishment.

He wasn't the only one taken aback. Garkie seemed especially shocked—his eyes were almost perfectly round, while his mouth looked like it might get stuck in an O.

"It's a little difficult to explain," I noted, glancing toward Halphys.

"If we define magic as the phenomenon of transforming spirits at will, then it isn't magic," she continued. "But at the same time, such techniques cannot be activated without the use of magic, so it wouldn't be wrong to classify it that way, either."

"H-huh? I'm definitely confused…" Garkie groaned, furrowing his brow.

"…Ah, I see. So that's how it is," Tilty whispered under her breath.

"Lady Tilty? You understood all that?"

"You're saying there are two separate systems that we lump together as magic, yes? One involves using magical energy to transform spirits, while the other changes the magical energy itself. I suppose non-elemental magic belongs to the second group?"

"Yes, exactly," I answered.

First of all, it was necessary to assume that we all possessed magical energy.

The second assumption was that spirits were essentially fragments of the world, and nobles had the ability to resonate with them and impart their will on them.

Those two premises formed the foundation of what was typically recognized as magic. However, non-elemental magic didn't involve transforming spirits themselves, but instead was about manipulating one's own magical energy.

As such, non-elemental magic could be described as simple magic that didn't invoke spirits.

"The sticking point is that you still can't use non-elemental magic if you can't use the elemental kind," I pointed out.

"…This is too much for me. Can someone please dumb it down a little…?!" Garkie groaned again.

"Gark…," Navre muttered, holding his head in his hands.

"Then let's address each point in turn," Halphys suggested with a small smile. "As Tilty said, there are two separate practices that we consider magic. The common denominator between them is that neither can be used without the ability to manipulate magical energy."

“The distinction between the nobility and the common classes is based solely on whether or not one can use magic. But that depends entirely on their ability to consciously control their magical energy,” I explained.

“Theoretically, even commoners would be capable of using non-elemental magic if they learned how to control their energy,” Halphys finished.

“What?! Does that mean they could do it without magical tools?!” Charnée practically yelled. Her reaction was the strongest of all.

I thought this would come as a huge shock to everyone, but they were mostly taking it surprisingly well.

“Yep.” I nodded. “Assuming they can control their magical energy.”

“But to use magic, you have to be able to use *elemental* magic, too, yes?” Tilty asked.

“Are you saying that commoners can’t consciously manipulate mana, while nobles are only able to do so because of their grasp of elemental magic?” Navre asked.

“It seems that way to me,” Tilty answered. “But are we both mistaken, I wonder? Anis?”

“No, you’re right. My guess is the ability to control magical energy is a remnant from when the first king of the Kingdom of Palettia entered into his spirit covenant. In my mind, it’s kind of like a license.”

“How so?”

“The royal family and the aristocracy are descended from spirit covenantors, which gives them the ability to commune with spirits in the outside world via the ones that exist in their souls—which in turn lets them use elemental magic. Through that knowledge of magic, they’re capable of consciously controlling raw magical energy.”

“…So it’s the other way around! Non-elemental magic doesn’t need the help of spirits, but you have to already know how to use magic in order to figure out how to do it in the first place…!”

“Yep. Magic users take non-elemental magic for granted, and since both forms are all about creating different phenomena, they classify it together with elemental magic.”

Even Euphie, a spirit covenantor, hadn’t consciously analyzed the differences between the two forms of magic; she considered

them both as natural as breathing.

If I had persisted in my belief that magic was brought about by spirits, I might never have understood it myself. It was only because of Halphys's research that I began to have my doubts.

"You can find non-elemental spirit stones, but strictly speaking, they're more like clumps of raw magical energy, so it might make more sense to call them *mana stones*."

"…I can see this stirring up another controversy," Tilty murmured softly.

Yes, we were naturally concerned that this research could ruffle feathers among the more religious members of the nobility.

That was precisely why Halphys knew better than to announce her findings prematurely, and why she had been pursuing this project on a purely personal basis.

"I think practicing non-elemental magic should help one better manipulate their mana more generally. I'm currently running tests to verify this theory…"

"That's all very intriguing…but this is just a prelude to Commander Anisphia's idea, isn't it…?" Navre asked, glancing my way nervously.

I gave him a wry smile, causing the others to slip into an uneasy silence.

"It's a long story. Maybe we should take a break first? Charnée, Priscilla, could you prepare us some tea?" I suggested, hoping to lighten the atmosphere.

"O-of course! I'll be right back!" Charnée responded, flustered.

"It will only take us a moment," Priscilla added with a polite bow, following after her.

"There's never a dull moment with you," Tilty quipped.

"Could you stop acting like you're observing some exotic beast?" I shot back.

"Perhaps you should take an honest look at your past conduct before you complain, no?" She snorted.

I pursed my lips, unable to say anything in response.

* * *

After a quick sip of the tea Charnée and Priscilla prepared for us, I

continued with my explanation.

"We haven't conducted enough experiments yet to validate Halphys's theory, not if we want to convince the wider public. Still, I'll proceed on the assumption that it's mostly accurate."

"Commander Anisphia, I just don't see how Halphys's research has any connection to magicite…," Navre interjected.

"That needs a little more clarification, so I guess we can start there. Thanks to Halphys's efforts to devise a simplified, streamlined approach to magic, we now believe there are two separate systems at play. Does everyone follow this far?"

"M-more or less…," Garkie muttered weakly, wrinkling his brow as if fighting off a migraine.

I didn't want to lose anyone here, so I continued my commentary, keeping him in mind.

"Basically, we can classify magical energy into two types."

"Mana, you mean?"

"Yes. Both elemental and non-elemental magic rely on the movement of magical energy, or mana, as it's also known. Where they differ is in whether energy is used to reach out to spirits. Let's use color as a metaphor. Non-elemental magic would be colorless, while elemental magic would have the color of its associated spirits."

"Why are you bringing colors into this, Your Highness?" Priscilla asked.

"That's a good question. Because this is the key to unlocking magicite."

"The key…?"

"Until now, no one has known how to put magicite to practical use. I have my own unique application for it, but there's no way I could disclose that publicly. The method I'm about to explain opens up a world of opportunity."

"What kind of method?"

"You all know how each piece of magicite possesses unique magical properties, right? I believe it's an aberrant type of spirit stone that comes into being when monsters consume spirits."

"Artificial magicite was developed based on the same premise," Tilty noted.

"Exactly. Processing spirit stones and altering them to invoke a specific kind of magic."

Our effort to create artificial magicite was made possible only

thanks to the combination of the knowledge accumulated in Lainie's vampire magicite and Euphie's intuitive understanding of magic after becoming a spirit covenantor.

In short, we processed individual spirit stones into an appropriate form to output the desired magical effect.

The same mechanism underlay our royal robes. There was no technical reason naturally occurring magicite couldn't be used, other than the difficulty in finding a suitable biological medium to trigger the desired effect.

Then there was the ether drug that I was presently taking to stabilize my own condition. The physical enhancements it provided were possible only because the magicite was using my body as the medium.

That being said, it put the body under immense strain. I could see now that this creation of mine, devised with only a shallow understanding of the side effects and consequences, was truly dangerous.

Euphie had been a terrifying sight when we finally confirmed that…

"Ugh…! This is no time for unpleasant memories…!" I muttered under my breath.

"A-are you okay?"

"Y-yeah. I'm fine. Sacrifices are unavoidable when you're doing research…"

"Sacrifices…?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing. Anyway, back to the topic at hand. Incorporating magicite spells into Halphys's definition, I consider it to be a third branch of magic."

"A *third* branch? How exactly is it different?"

"I'll explain step by step. Diagrams should help," I said, pulling out a portable blackboard and a piece of chalk.

"The common denominator underlying all magic is the ability to generate phenomena using magical energy. The first branch of magic is manipulating magical energy directly to exert an effect. This is the type we're calling non-elemental."

First, I drew a circle, writing the word *mana* in the middle. Below it, I added an illustration of someone with enhanced abilities and a magic-based sword, drawing a line between it and the circle.

"The second branch of magic is the one we all know—elemental magic that transforms spirits into different phenomena. You could

describe this as a state where magical energy and spirits are bound together."

I added another circle, again with the word *mana* scribbled inside.

Next to it, I drew a circle around the word *spirits*, then drew a larger circle encompassing both.

"Finally, the third branch of magic is found in the unique powers of individual monsters. The diagram is similar to the one for the second branch, but the difference is that it isn't triggered by resonating with spirits, but by controlling them."

For the third diagram, I drew two circles, containing the words *mana* and *spirits* respectively, then added a larger circle around both, in which I added the word *magicite*.

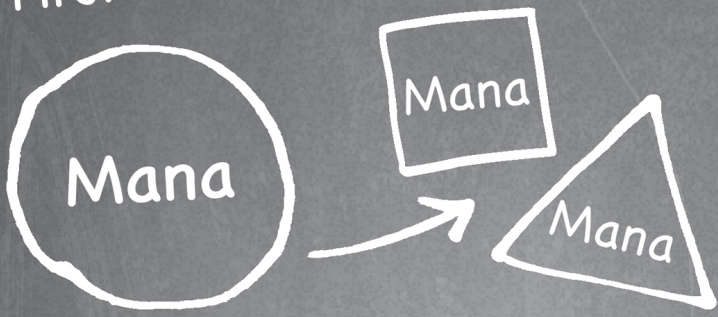
Next to the word *spirits* on the second diagram, I added *resonance*. For the third diagram, I added *control*.

After scribbling in all these annotations, I turned back to my audience.

"It *is* easier to grasp when you describe it that way," Tilty remarked. "The first branch is about controlling magical energy itself. The second involves the combination of mana and spirits, urging them to transform into magic. And the third is about forcefully changing the spirits themselves into magic. Am I on the right track?"

First Branch:

Directly manipulating magical energy to exert an effect.



Second Branch:

Using elemental magic that transforms spirits into different phenomena.

Third Branch:

Controlling spirits through magicite to use magic.

“Yep. You’re always quick to catch on.”

“We’ve been studying magicite together for a while, Anis. I can understand this much,” Tilty responded with a snort.

I hadn’t exactly been trying to praise her, but I really was glad she’d grasped this wider theory so quickly.

“The difficulty in handling magicite is due to the nature of the changes it’s undergone. Basically, a suitable medium is needed to activate its magical properties.”

“That’s the biological medium you mentioned, I assume?” Navre asked.

“Exactly. While the method of converting spirits into magic is the same, it seems that spirits absorbed into magicite undergo a transformation. In other words, they can’t use magic through normal means.”

“If the spirits themselves have been transformed, that means they won’t resonate, correct?”

“Precisely.”

In this world, magic could be described as the art of transforming spirits, which were fragments of the world.

The magic used by the aristocracy was based around transforming spirits into magic through the use of prayer and invocation.

In contrast, magic done with magicite involved specialized techniques through which monsters incorporated the spirits into themselves.

“…I’m not sure if I’m glad to learn this or if I wish I hadn’t,” Navre groaned.

“Well, I guess it’s hard to accept that spirits are transformed when they turn into magicite. But people can be transformed by spirits, too, right?”

“Huh?! Really?!” Charnée exclaimed.

“I mean, that’s what spirit covenantors are.”

I doubted that steadfast adherents to the spiritualist faith would accept the notion of spirits being corrupted by monsters. Then again, I personally found even the notion of spirit covenantors to be bordering on the insane.

Spirits could be considered a natural phenomenon unique to this world, so becoming a spirit covenantor was, in a sense, a

process of becoming one with nature.

For that reason, the souls of spirit covenantors weren't easily swayed. After all, natural phenomena had no need for emotions.

In the end, their bodies were reduced to mere vessels, and eventually, their sense of self, their ego, would melt away into the fabric of the world. To me, that process seemed no better than that by which magicite was formed.

"While not as drastic as the changes you might see generating magicite, human magical energy also undergoes transformation under the influence of the spirits that dwell within one's soul."

Lumi once told me that all humans in this world, barring a tiny number of rare individuals like myself, bore spirits within their souls. Considering how long she had been active as a spirit covenantor, I had no reason to doubt her.

It was the same for monsters. Driven by pure instinct—as far as I knew, at least—monsters sought ever greater power, creating and nurturing magicite.

"So magic is only influenced by the presence of spirits…? And it can still be used without them?" Navre murmured.

"When it comes to non-elemental magic, the important thing is that it's simply manipulation of raw magical energy. It doesn't really matter what kind of technique you're trying to activate—if you don't consciously call out to the spirits, it's ultimately of the non-elemental kind."

"Does that mean that even if the spell seems to have an attribute or element of its own, if it wasn't invoked through spirits, it's still non-elemental?"

"Yes. But it's because most elemental magic is invoked through spirits that it's so easy to use. That's where individual aptitudes come in."

"This is all very interesting, but aren't we getting a little sidetracked?" Tilty interrupted in exasperation. "I'm all for a new taxonomy of magic, but we were talking about making a new magical tool from magicite, weren't we?"

"Ugh! Right! I guess I got caught up in the heat of the moment…," I murmured, having genuinely veered away from our original purpose. "Getting back on track. There's a way to harmonize one's magical energy with a piece of magicite."

"That sounds suspiciously like becoming a monster yourself…"

"Indeed. But I assume you've devised a safe approach if you're

going to suggest actually making something. No?" Tilty asked.

"Exactly… Well, technically, it isn't such a big deal. Whether or not it's actually possible will depend on future research and more than a bit of luck."

"Why luck?" Charnée asked, head tilted.

Just as I said, I suspected the element of luck would play a significant role in whether we would actually succeed at this endeavor.

"It might not be possible to match the magical energy that serves as nourishment with the magicite itself…but there would be no *need* to match them if they were already compatible from the get-go, right? What you would need is a huge amount of good luck, though!"

"…Can you really leave something like that to chance?" Navre grunted, massaging his temple.

The truth was I didn't know how else to put it. It wasn't like we could start popularizing my Impressed Seal, so this was simply a theoretical discussion about how the process wasn't *im*possible.

"But if we can draw on the power of magicite crystals, it would drastically expand the tools we have at our disposal. It would also make defeating monsters more worthwhile for knights and adventurers, which ought to boost their motivation a fair bit. And with more warriors, *everyone's* chances of survival should go up, right?"

"That's…"

"There are unexplored areas all throughout the Kingdom of Palettia, so people will be battling monsters for a long time to come. If tools based on magicite can help in any way, I want to explore making them."

"In that case, wouldn't a magical sword made from artificial magicite be sufficient?" Tilty asked.

"Sure, I suppose it would. But I have to do *something*. I mean, there are going to be fewer and fewer opportunities for me to fight at the front lines from here on out."

Sometimes, I considered my new life and title as fetters—but at the same time, they had gotten me thinking.

"If *I* can't easily head out into battle, other people are going to have to fight instead. I'm supposed to lead them now, and I want to protect them. I don't want to lose them. So if I can't fight *with* them, I'll have to protect them some other way. And the best option I see

is to invent new magical tools."

"…Well, if that's what you want, then what's stopping you?" Tilty asked. "Euphyllia gave you her permission, I assume?"

"Yes, I've discussed it with her. We've been given the go ahead to try, though we might not get any actual results."

"…You've done plenty, Lady Anis." Tomas spoke up. "You don't need to shoulder everything yourself. Seeing as I'm here, I might as well give you a hand."

"Thanks, Tomas. I'm going to be calling on all of you today, everyone!"

When I needed assistance, these were the people I could reach out to. I felt like crying tears of gratitude, knowing that they were always here to help me make my dreams a reality.

Maybe one day I would be able to face events more seriously. With that in mind, I started asking everyone their thoughts and impressions.

* * *

After we disbanded following our discussions, I decided to return to my quarters.

"Good work today, Charnée, Priscilla. You can take a break now," I said to my two attendants.

"Thank you!" Charnée turned to leave.

Priscilla, however, remained where she stood, watching me with a strange look.

"Priscilla? Is something the matter?"

"Your Highness, there's something I would like to ask you, if I could have a moment."

"Sure. I don't mind."

What could she want to talk about? I was waiting for her to come out with her question, when she sent Charnée a meaningful glance. Whatever was on her mind, it seemed she wanted to discuss it with me in private.

Charnée must have sensed this, too, as she offered me a silent bow before stepping outside.

"What's bothering you so much you want to talk about it alone?" I asked.

Her gaze was piercing, and my hair stood on end. Priscilla, usually so expressionless and difficult to read, was now revealing the faintest glimpses of emotion—and it was like a razor-sharp blade.

"…Why?" she demanded.

"…Why what?"

"I don't understand you. The powers you possess are terrifying. Why don't you want what I would take in your position?"

"…And what would you want if you had the power?"

"Revenge."

She said it quietly, almost under her breath.

Her eyes were like an ice-cold abyss, and I could feel her hatred reaching out of it.

Frankly, I was baffled by this sudden display of emotion. Why was she bringing this up now? What did she hope to achieve by doing this?

"…You want revenge against someone, Priscilla?"

"As I mentioned briefly a short time ago, I've had a difficult relationship with my father."

"Do you hate him that much?"

"My father was an unjust ruler who always occupied a significant portion of my world. There have been times I wished not only that he would disappear, but that the entire kingdom would perish."

"…Why do you want to tell me all this?"

"Because it's a mystery to me. My circumstances could have been better—there's no arguing that—but I imagine yours were even worse. So why didn't you consider taking revenge?"

Revenge. Once again, that word shook my heart to its core.

I paused for a moment, taking a breath to steady myself, then turned back to Priscilla. Her expression remained cold and blank, as if her inner feelings had frozen over.

I had met several people over the course of my life who wore their hatred on their sleeve, but the woman before me was the first to express it in such a muted, chilling way.

"…I guess there have been countless times I've hated people over the years," I admitted.

“But you didn’t seek revenge.”

“No, because my father and mother always loved me. I suppose that’s why I was able to hang on all that time.”

“Then it’s no exaggeration to say the former king and queen saved this country.”

“That’s a stretch, don’t you think?”

“Do you honestly believe that?” Priscilla asked me flatly.

My lips were sealed tightly shut.

“If you had wanted to, you could have destroyed the Kingdom of Palettia. But you held back because of the love of your parents, didn’t you?”

“I won’t deny it…”

“Isn’t that admirable? You had ample reason to seek recompense from the world, but you chose not to. And now you’re striving to improve the country. From my perspective, it’s unbelievably commendable.”

“…You’re saying you despised your father so much you *can’t* believe that I don’t?”

“Indeed. Which is why I respect Her Majesty Queen Euphyllia so much. I also have great admiration for you, Your Highness, for making possible a future in which Queen Euphyllia can rule.”

With this, the frightening chill to Priscilla’s stare melted away, and she returned to her usual self—her emotions perfectly veiled.

She had seemed so cold and distant a moment ago, but the way she spoke about Euphie exuded such warmth and humanity.

“To me, Her Majesty is practically a divine being. Not because she’s a spirit covenantor or queen, but because she’s been such a salvation for me. *Ah*, I remember thinking. *Finally, someone in this world worthy of my prayers.*”

“…I see.”

“It’s also why I was so intrigued by you, Your Highness. I’m very pleased to hear your answer just now.” Priscilla nodded in genuine satisfaction.

Priscilla had called me a mystery, but she was likewise an enigma to me.

It would take time for us to fully understand each other.

“My father not only disrespected you, Your Highness—he scorned His Former Majesty. I realize now what a fool he was.”

“Maybe it kind of makes sense when you look back on it?” I suggested.

“Now that you’ve achieved tangible results, that’s only natural.”

“I just pray everything will be all right as we move forward. And wonder whether I might be wrong. Pride can have frightening consequences.”

“I would very much like to share that sentiment with my father.”

“…I’m building a country where you don’t have to hold on to that hate, Priscilla. We’ll change it. So enough with those thoughts, all right?”

Priscilla was a little strange—there was no doubt about that—but she wasn’t a bad person. If at all possible, I wanted to keep her on my side.

With this, Priscilla’s expression betrayed a hint of surprise—and I finally caught a glimpse of her true self.

Relaxing, she flashed me a gentle smile. “…Yours is a worthy cause, Your Highness.”

In the three days since my return to the royal capital, I had entrusted Tilty, Halphys, and Tomas with researching and mass-producing a new magical sword design based on artificial magicite.

Now, with that business concluded, I had returned to the development site with Navre and the others.

“That’s the plan, Lieutenant Commander! For the time being, we’ll be concentrating on magicite research, so let me know if anything urgent comes up!” I cheered.

Dragus, reading over a stack of documents in his office, smiled weakly. “Hmm… Our research facilities aren’t fully up and running yet. Are you sure?”

“Actually, this kind of research is better done outside! We’ll be borrowing one of the vacant lots.”

“I understand. I wish you the best of luck with your experiments.”

“Thanks. By the way, did you run into any trouble while I was gone?”

“No, nothing in particular. Only…”

“Yes?”

“I’m a little concerned about what the monsters are doing. We’ve seen less of them lately. Are they lurking on the perimeter, waiting for an opportunity to strike? Or are they moving away? It would be a relief in the latter case, but there’s still every sign they’re nearby. We may find ourselves facing a small-scale stampede sooner or later.”

“Hmm… A stampede, huh? Do you think we could handle a small one with our current resources?”

“I believe so, at present levels. But if a magicite monster rears its head, there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Got it. Then I want everyone to be vigilant. Anything out of the ordinary, I want to hear about it, down to the most trivial details.”

“As you wish.”

Hmm. Perhaps our efforts to thin their numbers had taught the nearby monsters caution. If we pushed them too hard, they could

start fighting among themselves, which risked drawing the attention of magicite monsters, just as Dragus feared.

"Magicite monsters… That *could* be a chance to get our hands on more magicite, though…," I wondered aloud.

"I hope I didn't hear what I think I heard, Commander Anisphia…?" Navre remarked.

"I just mean, you know… If nothing happens, that's great. But if it *does*, as a researcher, well…"

"…"

"…I'm joking, Navre. Come on. Peace is what we want!"

Intimidated by his cold gaze, I looked away, retracting my statement.

Navre shook his head; I'm sure he found my behavior incredibly vexing.

"I understand your desire to conduct research, but given your present magicite inventory, I don't see the need to add any more."

"I know, I know. Sorry! I'll think of ways to make better use of what I already have!"

Navre was right. I *did* have an extensive stock of magicite crystals.

When I showed everyone the collection I had set aside for research, they were one and all taken aback by the sheer number of items.

That being said, we would most likely have to let the vast majority of them lie dormant for the time being. The chances of being able to handle any particular specimen were low.

"Well then, let's start trying them out!" I called, leading Navre and the others to a deserted lot set aside for later construction.

It was an open space a short distance from the outer wall, and though we could see people working in the distance, there was no one in the immediate vicinity. Once we were all ready, I opened the lid of my magicite storage case.

"There are so many of them…," Charnée murmured in admiration as she peered into the case.

"My head hurts thinking about how many monsters the commander must have hunted to get these…," Navre mumbled with a sigh.

I glanced at Garkie, worried that he might be feeling a little left out lately, but he merely shrugged his shoulders. "This is Lady Anis we're talking about, Navre. Surely you know her well enough by

now."

"You can't just let her recklessness slide like that…"

"All right now, come on!" I interrupted in an effort to shift gears. "We're going to conduct a few experiments to see how each crystal reacts. But there's something I need to warn you about first."

We had to be careful from here on out if we were to respond to any contingencies.

Perhaps sensing my concern, everyone wore a solemn look. They knew enough to take whatever warnings I had seriously, and for that, I was grateful.

Now that everyone was on guard, I launched into my explanation.

"I don't think you'll find a compatible piece right away, but if you come across one that responds strangely, let go of it immediately. Worst-case scenario, you might end up absorbing it into your body."

"Absorbing the magicite…? That's a scary thought," Charnée exclaimed, swallowing.

"The odds of that happening are low, but you should still be cautious," I reassured her as warmly as I could.

"I—I understand!"

"Like I said, that's the worst-case scenario, but we do have to consider the possibility. That's a key difference between magicite crystals and spirit stones."

"Just how likely is it?" Garkie asked.

"Hmm… About as likely as meeting someone who looks like your mirror image, I guess?"

"…That would be pretty difficult, unless you're a twin. Right?"

"Like I said, it's *extremely* unlikely. But since we don't have a lot of information to rely on, we'll have to test and see what happens."

"Hmm. I guess so," Garkie muttered.

"That's the impression I always got, in my experience. Even here in the Kingdom of Palettia, I don't think people are doing enough research into magical energy itself. Plenty of people don't think any deeper than the surface level," I blurted out before I could stop myself.

It was easy enough to say that magical energy—mana—was universal. I believed, however, that there were differences from person to person, which were what gave rise to varying strengths and weaknesses and aptitudes.

More to the point, there were people like Tilty who became mentally and physically unwell when using magic. The true nature of magical energy clearly wasn't fully understood.

In the Kingdom of Palettia, magic was considered mystical, and as a result, most people lacked any desire to delve deep into its secrets. The dominant culture led to this lack of curiosity about magic's inner workings.

Those perceptions would have to be changed, slow though the process might be. As it was a matter of faith for much of the kingdom, it couldn't be rushed.

For that reason, I had decided that the best shortcut was to proceed steadily without haste. Today's experiment was one step in that direction.

"Commander Anisphia, is there a quick way to tell if one's mana is compatible with any given magicite crystal?" Priscilla asked.

"Not until you try it. It's also not certain how much of its power we'll be able to draw out. There's every chance it won't do anything at all."

"That sounds rather challenging…"

"In science and technology, progress is all about steady trial and error."

"I see. Is there anything else we should be mindful of?"

"Hmm… Right. Spirit stones react to a person's will when activated with magical energy. The key difference with magicite is that spirits stones don't harbor their own innate will."

"Does that mean magicite crystals are *alive*?" Priscilla asked, discreetly raising a hand into the air.

Charnée startled at this question, quietly backing away from the magicite case.

"It depends on how you define *alive*. Personally, I don't think so. Maybe it would be more accurate to say they house residual thoughts?"

"Residual thoughts…?"

"Magicite crystals are thought to be created when monsters adapt to harsh environments in order to survive, hence my belief that they house strong wills and thoughts."

Considering the dragon magicite that now dwelled within me, I was fairly confident on this point.

Bits and pieces of knowledge sometimes flowed from the

magicite that I now called my own. That happened only when I was already close to stumbling on the solution to a problem, though—it was no help while I was still struggling to figure it out.

Why didn't you just tell me from the beginning? I sometimes felt like complaining, but it was no use. No matter how I pressed, the magicite wouldn't respond. Either the dragon's will had left it, or the crystal was just being stubborn. Personally, I thought it had a bit of a mean streak.

Vampires were born the same way. In other words, it made perfect sense to think that magicite crystals possessed some kind of will or consciousness.

"To harness the power of a magicite crystal, you either need to be in tune with its will or overcome it with your own. Either way, you can then grow a new crystal inside yourself, and for monsters, they become ever stronger."

"So it's all about strength of will…?"

"Well, I don't have any concrete evidence to support this theory. That's what we're here to confirm! Let's get started! Taking care not to make any mistakes, of course!"

"…That's all well and good, but why do you not sound particularly cautious, Commander?" Navre murmured gloomily, his shoulders slumping.

"Shut up, Navre," I fired back, holding the magicite case in my arms. "If anything catches your eye, go ahead and touch it. Intuition is key in situations like this."

"Ugh. I'm scared to touch them… They're so rare…" Charnée, no doubt put off by my explanation, timidly kept her distance.

"They don't hold much practical value, but I do think they're worthwhile symbols of honor," I observed.

"Symbols of honor…?" Garkie repeated softly.

"…? Garkie?"

Before I knew it, I caught him staring down at the magicite crystals with uncharacteristic solemnity.

Just before I could ask him if everything was all right, he looked up. "Lady Anis, did you bring that crystal, too?"

"Which crystal?"

"…The one from the demi-human we encountered in Filwach Forest."

"…Ah. Yeah. It's here."

I understood now why he seemed so out of sorts.

During our sojourn into Filwach Forest, we came across a demi-human being chased by a vampire, and it was Garkie who took care of him in his final moments.

I indicated the demi-human's magicite, and Garkie reached out to pick it up.

"…If what you said is true, Lady Anis, and magicite holds on to its original consciousness, would we be able to figure out what he was thinking?" he murmured as he held it up to the sunlight.

"…I'm not sure."

"I'm just curious, is all. Do you mind if I try channeling mana through it?"

"Go ahead, please," I said.

Garkie nodded, tightening his fingers around the crystal.

He remained silent for a long moment, with no visible reaction. Eventually, apparently having failed to get a response from the magicite, he shook his head.

"…It's no good," he breathed softly.

"Hmm. You didn't feel anything?"

"It wasn't that there's no response. More like my mana wasn't being absorbed by it. I see what you mean—it feels different from channeling mana into a spirit."

"I see. So just channeling magical energy isn't enough, then…?"

"What kind of magic did the demi-human use…? I mean, his whole body was covered in flames…," Garkie mumbled, still staring at the magicite crystal—when it began to glow faintly.

For a second, I doubted my eyes—but it was indeed emitting a dull light.

Just before I could put my thoughts into words, the light vanished. A moment later, Garkie's hand burst into flames.

"Wha…?!" I sputtered.

"Hey, Gark?!" Navre exclaimed.

"Y-your hand is on fire!" Priscilla screamed.

"…Huh? Wh-what? My hand?" Garkie snapped out of his reverie and looked up in panic—and the second he laid eyes on his burning hand, he froze. "Huh?! What the hell?!"

"Gark! Let go of the magicite!"

"C-can't you feel it?! It's literally burning, right?!"

"Of course it's hot…! No, hold on! Huh?! What the hell is this?!" Garkie screamed, waving his hand with all his might.

The flames, however, refused to dissipate.

Both Navre and Charnée were crying out in alarm, but Garkie was so flustered that he wasn't paying them any attention.

"W-we've gotta put it out! We've gotta extinguish it!"

"Excuse me, Master Gark," Priscilla intervened calmly, summoning a sphere of water over his hand.

But the water evaporated in a cloud of useless steam.

Priscilla's eyes widened in shock. "Oh dear…"

"It won't go out…?!"

"It *has* weakened, though!"

"Then maybe another one will do it…," Priscilla began, when—

"…No, it's all right. I'll stop it," Garkie interrupted, regaining his composure. After taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes—and the flames clinging to his hand gently weakened until they were gone.

There were no burns on his skin, but still I raised a hand to my chest in relief.

"Are you okay, Garkie?" I asked.

"Y-yeah. I'm fine."

"And the magicite?"

"It's fine, too. I think," he said, showing me the crystal. I couldn't discern any outward changes.

Realizing that I was sweating, I breathed a sigh of relief and wiped my forehead. There was a startling amount of perspiration on my hand.

"What on earth did you just do, Gark? How did you activate the magicite?" Navre demanded.

"I was just imagining how the demi-human might have used it as I channeled mana into it, and then it ignited…"

"You mean you re-created the demi-human's powers?"

"Is that what happened…?" Garkie wondered.

I never would have expected that it could be so easy to unleash the power of a magicite crystal.

"Can you do it again?" I asked.

"I'll try," he answered, clutching the crystal and focusing his attention once more.

He let out a small groan, and the magicite again began to emit its faint glow. Then, in a split second, Garkie's hand lit up in flame.

The flames didn't seem to be burning him—they simply flickered over his hand, moving gently in the breeze. Very curious.

"I did it… This is pretty tough, though, you know?"

“Tough?”

“I mean, it’s a lot more difficult than regular magic… Pretty tiring. And I don’t think I can control it at will.”

“Can you put it out?”

“Sure,” he answered, and the flames quickly disappeared as if they never existed.

Just as I had expected, there was nothing wrong with either Garkie’s hand or the magicite crystal.

The flame itself was very unusual, but what exactly distinguished it from regular magic?

“I can’t use magic, so I wonder if it would normally be possible for someone to safely shroud their hands in flame like that?” I asked the others.

“No way. I’d be too scared to cover my body with actual fire…”

“We can cover staves and weapons with magic, but you would need an expert’s level of control to directly enchant your own body.”

“But Garkie’s hand was definitely burning just now from the magicite, right…?”

“I wouldn’t say it was *burning*, exactly. More like the flames were *attached* to his hand, perhaps…?”

Garkie waved his hand through the air, staring at it in muted consternation.

I kept stealing glances and second-guessing myself, but he really seemed completely unharmed. What exactly was the nature of what we had just witnessed?

“You said you were never particularly good at traditional magic, right, Garkie?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he answered. “Tell you the truth, I’m surprised I managed to do whatever that was.”

“Navre?” I asked, turning to address him. “Sorry to ask this, but could you try triggering it the same way Garkie did?”

“Very well.”

Navre took the magicite from Garkie and concentrated his attention on it. The crystal, however, neither lit up nor showed any other reaction.

He remained that way for a long moment before finally shaking his head.

“…It’s no good. I can’t get any response from it.”

“Maybe Garkie’s the only one who can get a reaction from this

one?”

“Shall I try it?” Charnée asked.

“I could attempt it, too,” Priscilla added.

One after another, they both tried to elicit a reaction from the crystal, to no avail.

In the end, I asked Garkie to try activating the magicite again, and sure enough, the flames reappeared for him.

“It’s definitely responding only to you, Garkie,” I remarked.

“Why, though?”

“Hmm…”

The others were all stumped, but I was considering two possibilities.

The first was that Garkie’s magical energy simply had a high level of compatibility with the crystal.

The second was more complicated. The demi-human had seemed to connect with Garkie for a moment before it breathed its last, and its final actions may have imparted something into the magicite—much like what existed between me and the dragon.

They were both plausible explanations, but proving either would be incredibly difficult. Not even I knew how to demonstrate that magicite crystals contained an imprinted sense of will.

While I could feel the dragon’s thoughts since absorbing its magicite into myself, that didn’t mean I could communicate with it or engage in conversation.

In the end, the difficulty would be in proving the nature of magicite to outside observers. No doubt it would take a great deal of time to find a solution. Right now, however, something else was more important.

“Lady Anis,” Garkie called out, tearing me from my thoughts. He was fixing me with an unusually stern look. “You’re going to turn this magicite crystal into a tool, right? In that case…”

“Of course. I’ll let you have it.”

“…Yes.” He breathed a deep sigh, staring down at the crystal still clasped tight in his hand.

With his eyes in their usual squint, I had no way to read his emotions, but I could tell that he was deep in thought.

“…Was it frightening?” I ventured.

“No. Awe inspiring, maybe? Not simply scary. It’s just…”

“Just?”

“I’ll never forget what that demi-human looked like at the end,

so I've got reservations about taking his powers into my own hands… I owe it to him to treat this crystal with the respect it deserves," he murmured under his breath.

His voice was calm and measured—quite unlike its usual tone.

It was like a flame burning quietly but surely; not fierce, but reassuring, like a beacon in the darkness.

Strangely, this side of Garkie didn't bother me. Actually, my muscles relaxed as I leaned forward to tap him lightly on the shoulder.

"If you keep at it, I'm sure you'll master its power. After watching you just now, I'm certain of it."

"Lady Anis."

"What you're experiencing right now must be similar to how I feel about the dragon. Maybe it's because we've taken their lives, their very existences, into our hands. It's a heavy thing when you put it that way."

Come to think of it, the dragon may well have entrusted its future to me, too.

If there was some way to leave part of yourself behind after death… If you could give concrete form to the life you had led…

Handing over a piece of magicite, an embodiment of one's life and being, was its own form of bequeathing. In the grand scheme of life and inheritance, it wasn't an unthinkable notion.

Some might consider this chain of inheritance a blessing, while others might see it as a curse.

It was my responsibility, as part of that chain, to ensure that inheritance didn't follow the wrong path. I had to pray to continue to build on what I had been entrusted with.

…My thoughts turned to Acryl—specifically, to a conversation we'd had. We hadn't seen eye to eye then.

This idea was something she might relate to—this chain of life, of living and dying and choosing how to approach the question of one's existence.

…*Hold on. Maybe I should try talking to her again?* I still didn't understand a whole lot about demi-humans, and it would be good to get a closer perspective on how they saw the world.

If using magicite to build magical tools was taboo in their cultures, I might need to reconsider this whole endeavor.

"Lady Anis?" Garkie asked. "Is something wrong?"

"Sorry, I've gotta go check on something! We'd better report

back to Lieutenant Commander Dragus and be on our way!"

"Eh?! That's a bit sudden, isn't it?! And where are we going?!"

"To the frontier! I need to check in with Allie!"

"Excuse me?!" Navre gawked.

Why hadn't this occurred to me sooner? I guess because I had just been using the dragon magicite however I pleased!

If Acryl wasn't against putting magicite to use, maybe I could even ask her for suggestions and advice! This would be a vital step in my plan to move forward!

"Wait a minute, Commander Anisphia!"

* * *

"Don't you have enough common sense to at least give us a heads-up?" Allie grumbled. "I understand you're oblivious to your position, but surely you're not incapable of imagining the burden your unpredictability puts on others? *Anyone* ought to be able to do that much. You're choosing not to. Aren't you, Sister?"

"Th-that's why I'm apologizing…"

"…You're such a pain in the neck."

"I said I'm sorry!"

We'd rushed to the frontier by Airdra and Airbike, hoping to meet with Acryl as quickly as possible.

There, the two individuals I had come to see continued to needle me with a constant stream of snide remarks.

Garkie and the others did their best to avoid making eye contact with our hosts. They evidently didn't want to get involved—even if it meant hanging me out to dry.

Allie made no effort to hide his displeasure. "I'm very busy, Sister. Be quick. Tell me what you want."

I mean, I *knew* he was busy. He had been awarded the title of baron and was spearheading development efforts in the frontier, so his position was similar to mine, in some respects. I guess I hadn't really given much thought to it before…

"Um, I actually came here to see Acryl, so don't let me keep you…"

"Her position here is complicated. By some perspectives, you could consider her a guest and a representative of the Lycant tribe.

If you cause her any headaches, well…”

“Hey, I didn’t come here to be a bother…”

“Isn’t that what you’re already doing? I don’t trust you,” Acryl interjected mercilessly.

“Ugh…!”

I was to blame here. I knew that, but it still hurt.

“We’re deeply sorry for the inconvenience, Master Algard.” Navre spoke up. “I’ll give Her Highness a proper warning later…”

“It can’t be easy being my sister’s advisor, Navre…,” Allie said in a show of sympathy.

Navre chuckled with a hollow expression.

Throughout this exchange, everyone's piercing gaze remained locked on me, leaving me to squirm awkwardly.

Perhaps hoping to lighten the atmosphere, Allie feigned a cough to clear his throat. "Ahem… Well, Sister, what *did* you need?"

"Um, actually, I'm researching an idea for a new magical tool, and I was thinking of using magicite crystals in the design. I was wondering if demi-humans might have any thoughts on that…"

"Magicite?" Acryl seemed truly mystified.

Huh? That was far from the reaction I had been expecting.

"I've collected magicite crystals from all different monsters, but one of them belonged to a demi-human, too," I continued, addressing Acryl directly. "I thought it would be useful in making a magical tool, but I'm not sure if that was something I should pursue. I wanted to ask you about it, Acryl."

"…One came from a demi-human?"

"During the vampire incident. I didn't take it by force or anything. He gave it to us willingly…"

"Hmm."

"…That's a little dismissive, no?"

"…You think so?"

"I mean, for a demi-human, the magicite was originally part of their body," I clarified. "I thought maybe they wouldn't want it to be used making tools, you know?"

"Ah, I see… *That's* what you are worried about." Acryl's expression softened in realization. "If I may, I am surprised you would come to me for this. If you cheated him or killed him to take it by force, indeed, I would think little of you and your methods. But if it was a gift, I cannot say I have any stake in the matter at all."

"Really?"

"For demi-humans, magicite crystals are like extensions of ourselves. They are priceless, so entrusting it to someone is a sign of recognition. For us, it is customary to pass them on to someone we trust before we die."

"Oh, wow…"

"Our magicite crystals are the source of our powers. If one you trust is with you at your deathbed, you would leave your magicite

with them. If not, you let it return to the earth. But it is common to give them to a family member or a close friend when the time comes."

"…I see."

That worldview was perhaps unique to demi-humans. Having inherited their magicite and owing their lives to it, they would regard the crystals not only as the source of their powers, but as symbols of their very existence.

That was certainly an understandable custom, passing on something so important to someone you trusted and acknowledged.

"So he entrusted it to me…"

"He did," Acryl said firmly. "Meaning he was putting his faith in you to keep him safe, Anisphia. That is how we pass life down. I am surprised you would use it in a magical tool, but I suppose that's another form a legacy can take."

"Right…"

Acryl spoke plainly, as if the matter didn't require a great deal of thought. In a way, her thoughts were much like my own, just taking a different perspective.

To a demi-human, their magicite crystal was just as important as their own life. If it could be passed on after death, no matter the method, that wasn't something to be avoided.

It seemed I had been more worried than I needed to be. At least now I could make a magical tool for Garkie with confidence.

"I am impressed. Using magicite to make a tool instead of taking it directly—no one has even heard of such a thing," Acryl remarked.

"It isn't something just anyone can use, though," I pointed out. "And I don't think we should make it too public, either. Even if the situation is fine now, there may be more demi-humans in the future, and I don't want people going after them for their magicite crystals."

"A stomach-turning thought… But also one for the future, wouldn't you agree? Won't it take years for the Kingdom of Palettia to learn to coexist with demi-humans? You haven't even found any settlements yet. It's a bit early to worry about that."

"But I know you, Acryl. I have to be mindful of how you feel."

"…Hmph," Acryl snorted with an unreadable look.

Was she uncomfortable to hear I was concerned about her?

She might well be my sister-in-law one day in the future, so I

wanted to get to know her better.

"Whatever you do with it, I hope it helps people," she said at last. "It is not our custom, but it is another use for them."

"I see… While we're here, can I ask you about your powers? It would be a really helpful reference!"

"Eh…?"

"No need to frown at me! Come on, please? Pretty please?"

I all but fell to my knees begging her, but Acryl just turned to Allie with visible annoyance.

At this, Allie quietly shook his head, causing Acryl's shoulders to droop. "…As you wish. Just be quick," she muttered.

"Thank you, Acryl!"

"Don't cling to me, you positively *vexing*…!"

With that taken care of, I delved into my questions about Acryl's Lycant tribe and the customs of other demi-humans.

Resigned to her fate, she tagged along half-heartedly.

Sorry, Acryl! Think of this as a necessary investment for the future!

* * *

"Ah, thank you so much, Acryl! You've been a huge help!"

"…I've only come to say goodbye. Go quickly."

"Ha-ha-ha… Well, I just wanted to thank you all for today! Make sure to take care of yourselves!"

After saying goodbye to Acryl, we set off back to the development site for the new city.

This forced march was made possible thanks to our flying magical tools. I felt a little guilty about inconveniencing Allie and Acryl like that, but these struggles were an inevitable part of technological research and development.

…Next time, I would bring Acryl a gift both as thanks and as an apology. I didn't want her to hate me!

"Great work today, everyone! I'll see you all tomorrow!" I announced after our arrival, promptly dismissing the others.

Once they had left one by one, I decided to head back to my quarters—and stopped in my tracks.

"Garkie? What's wrong?"

"Lady Anis," he said, looking over his shoulder. His usual cheer

was nowhere to be seen.

That was odd—and a little worrying.

"If you have any issues, I'm always here for you."

"No… It's not an issue, not exactly…," he mumbled evasively.

It would have been easy for me to question him further, but for whatever reason, I felt like this was not the time to rush.

I waited in silence for Garkie to continue. After letting out a resigned groan, he finally spoke up. "…I've felt a bit pathetic lately…"

"Huh? Again? Why?"

"Everyone's been so busy since these works in the new city got underway. Not just you, Lady Anis. Halphys and Navre, too…"

"Well, that's true."

"…I know they're both just trying to be useful to you…but there isn't much *I* can contribute. I don't have any unique talents like they do…"

"You're doing your job well, Garkie. You don't need to put yourself down."

"I know there's no point being jealous of others, and I'm trying not to let it bother me. But still…" He looked away.

His vacant stare seemed to settle on something far into the distance. Just what was he trying to picture?

Once more, his tone grew serious, the air thick and heavy. Garkie was the first to break the silence.

"I wonder if I'm not trying hard enough. Maybe I'm not as dedicated as I should be?"

"…What's gotten that idea into your head?"

"You're going to use the magicite from the demi-human to make a new tool, aren't you, Lady Anis…?"

"Yeah. If possible, I was hoping to ask you to try it out, seeing as your magical energy is already compatible with it."

"I don't know if I deserve the magicite. I'm not capable of anything impressive like the others are…"

"…Did you hear what Acryl said about demi-humans?" I asked.

Garkie nodded, his clenched fists shaking slightly.

I wasn't sure what to say. I could understand how he had ended up feeling this way. After all, I recognized what he was saying in myself.

Sometimes, you couldn't help but compare yourself to others—and when you went too far, you risked overlooking your own

abilities and strengths.

Right now, Garkie was trapped in the mire of his own thoughts.

I had to choose my next words carefully so there would be no risk of miscommunication. I couldn't afford to ignore his plight.

"Garkie, do you feel like you're worthless because you haven't given your all?"

"Huh?"

"That feeling of impatience you have—I think it's important. But if you get caught up in it and make a mistake, it could ruin everything. I don't think running full speed all the time is necessarily a good thing."

"…"

"I guess that means you don't follow?"

"…No, I don't."

"I don't mean this in a bad way, but you've never really struck me as the desperate type, Garkie—unlike me."

"What do you mean, Lady Anis?"

"I can be impatient. I get anxious, frustrated, depressed, and resentful, and if I slow down, I feel like I'll end up drowning. For the longest time, I was just so desperate."

I could never obtain what I most desperately desired. I could never be the ideal version of myself, and that unmet wish was eating me alive.

But I couldn't give up on living, even if no one ever gave me the recognition I craved.

Every day, I felt as if I were sinking deeper into a bottomless swamp, unable to grasp on to anything yet still fighting to lift my head. That was the life Anisphia Wynn Palettia had walked.

"I'm not trying to feel sorry for myself, but I don't think you could truly understand what I went through and how it affected me."

"…That's true."

"I was always desperate, and I think Acryl was desperate in a slightly different way. We had to overcome our harsh realities in order to survive. There's no way to move forward without accepting it. It's a bitter pill, but you have to force yourself to swallow it down."

I paused there, watching Garkie carefully.

He looked puzzled for a long moment, but as if realizing that he needed to face this head-on, he stared straight into my eyes.

“I don’t think people need to be so desperate all the time,” I continued. “Sometimes you do need to push yourself to your limits, but the right time to do that is something that every person has to figure out for themselves.”

“Hmm, perhaps…”

“It’s one thing to have to accept the reality that’s been thrust on you, and something else entirely to willingly claim it for yourself, don’t you think?”

“…?! I—I…!”

My last comment had been meant as a joke, but seeing Garkie tense up in realization, I instantly regretted my choice of words. I hated making him feel even worse, but there was no way I could get my point across without bringing this all up.

“Sorry for making you say all that!” Garkie stammered. “I’m overstepping…!”

“Don’t worry about that, Garkie. What I’m trying to say is you can be whoever you want to be,” I said.

He jerked his head up, startled.

Those were the words that had saved me—the words I had waited years to hear. I had given up on ever hearing them, convinced that I didn’t deserve them.

“I’ve always been free to do whatever I wanted. Not because people excused my selfishness, though. If I had tried playing my role as princess, the situation could have ended up much worse than it did. Then again, deep down, I sometimes wonder whether I would have been better off carrying the burden of royalty and playing along with expectations.”

What would have happened if I hadn’t given up on being a princess—if I had kept pushing ahead in spite of everything?

Would I have been able to endure it? The more I tried to be a princess, the more my inability to use magic held me back.

Even now, I still harbored doubts. I couldn’t trust in myself, nor in others—not easily. Even when I wanted to, my misgivings pulled at the corners of my memories, holding me back.

That was one weakness I couldn’t hide. If I’d tried to take center stage as princess in spite of that, it could have left me broken.

That was what it meant to be desperate. I wanted to live, I refused to give up on my dreams, and in my heart of hearts, I wanted to be recognized and genuinely loved. That was all.

“It’s not about *wanting* to choose, but *having* to choose. Anyone

can face that kind of dilemma, but it's better to be able to say this is the life you wanted, don't you think? Everyone has their own reasons, and that's as it should be—because your life belongs to you alone, Garkie."

"It does…?"

"Yep. Not just you, either. Halphys is master of her own life, as is Navre, Charnée, Priscilla, and everyone else involved with me. I want them to live their lives the way they want."

That was the future I dreamed of, the one I aspired to—where people weren't forced to choose from a limited number of options, but could pursue what they truly desired.

I knew how difficult it would be, but I wanted to create that future and to pass it on to the generations after me.

"It's normal to compare yourself to people around you," I continued. "It's natural to be concerned when you see everyone else getting ahead. But if you're always losing sight of yourself and rushing forward blindly, you risk overlooking what matters most. You've always supported *my* dreams, Garkie, so I don't want to see that happen to you."

"Lady Anis…"

"You might think everything relies on luck, but you know, whether you can seize the opportunity when luck strikes depends largely on your own self-confidence."

"Self-confidence is tough for me… This stings to hear."

"Halphys and Navre are both working hard, so I understand it might seem impossible to catch up, but you're in no way second best, Garkie."

"…It's kind of embarrassing having to be told that." He forced a smile, but I could still see he was conflicted.

I gave him a firm pat on the back. He jolted at the force of the impact, then rubbed his back while looking at me with pity.

"This is no time to be feeling down, Garkie. You'll soon be a user of your very own magicite-based tool. That's something neither Navre nor Halphys can boast about!"

"…I'm afraid that's nothing to be proud of. I'm just leaning on your talents, Lady Anis."

"So what if you're borrowing from others? Strive to master it better than anyone else. Then people will be begging to give you their skills. What do you think?"

"That's easy enough to say…," he muttered, giving the back of

his head a vigorous scratch. Then he turned his face up to the sky slightly and breathed a deep sigh.

When he was finally ready to talk to me again, his usual cheer was back.

"I'm pathetic! I guess it just isn't in me to sit down and think! I'll just keep charging ahead without worrying about the consequences!"

"That sounds more like you, Garkie."

"Sorry for bothering you! Seriously, this is no time to be cowering in fear!" Garkie cried, slapping his cheeks with his hands.

His face turned worryingly red, but at least he looked like he was back to his usual self.

"If I were you, Lady Anis, dealing with the likes of me, I'd probably sneak off and fly away while my back was turned," he joked.

"Just how gutless do you think I am? And wouldn't you chase after me if I did fly off?"

"Well, I think strength of heart and perseverance is a good thing!"

"Indeed."

With that, we both broke into laughter.

Garkie would be okay now. The main concern weighing on him was how he saw himself compared to Halphys and Navre, who had both found ways to demonstrate their own strengths. That being the case, I wanted nothing more than to give him a chance to demonstrate his own abilities…

"…Hold on a second," I blurted out as an idea suddenly crossed my mind.

What was it Dragus had said about all the local monsters? Combine that with a magicite-based magical sword, and…

Hm. We could easily kill two birds with one stone here.

"Lady Anis? Um… Did you just strike on an idea…?"

"…I did! If I'm right, I think we can solve a bunch of problems all at once! I'll need to talk it over with everyone tomorrow and get started working on it! We're going to be busy!"

"…Yes, I get that feeling all right."

"You'll stick by my side?"

At this question, Garkie gave me a fearless smile.

CHAPTER 9
With Sword in Hand

The land where the new city was being built had formerly been returned to the crown after previous attempts to develop it ended in failure. Because the territory had been left untouched by human hands for so many years, there were countless monster dens and gathering places all over.

One such area was a nearby forest, in which my fully armored knights were now assembled in formation with Lieutenant Commander Dragus standing at the forefront.

“Listen up!” he bellowed. “Commander Anisphia is going to make an announcement!”

I smiled self-consciously at his dignified tone of voice, as everyone focused on me. The assembled knights stood at full attention as I stepped forward, Garkie and Navre flanking me.

“At ease, everyone,” I began. Although the knights adopted a more relaxed stance, they remained vigilant.

No, I still wasn’t used to seeing people jump to follow my every command. Reminding myself again and again that I couldn’t afford to let that anxiety show, I started with my explanation.

“Today’s mission is different from usual. We won’t be thinning out monster hordes—or at least, that isn’t our main goal here. But I still want you to work hard at it, because our success here will lead to a brighter tomorrow. Oh, and try not to get hurt! It’s not like we’re close enough to done that we can get plenty of R & R later!”

That last joke helped the knights to relax. Some even laughed. It was never good to be too tense.

At that moment, Dragus gave an obviously fake cough—and the knights promptly snapped back to attention.

"…That's all from me. Lieutenant Commander Dragus can take it from here," I finished, turning to my second-in-command.

"Understood… Everyone, commence the operation! Act swiftly! And may the spirits bless the Kingdom of Palettia!"

"May the spirits bless the Kingdom of Palettia!" the knights shouted in unison.

With that oath, they quickly dispersed into the forest.

Watching them leave, Dragus breathed a deep sigh. "Very good, Commander Anisphia."

"I suppose neither of us are quite used to this yet, are we?"

"Compared to you, all I have to be proud of are the accomplishments of age. If I can't do this much, I wouldn't deserve to hold my position," he answered, pounding his chest with a clenched fist.

His grin soon faded as he turned back to the forest, his eyes sharpening as if he were searching for invisible enemies. "I hope the men can handle this…," he murmured.

"They'll be fine so long as they remember to be cautious. You trained them properly, didn't you?" I pointed out.

"Of course. Knights in your service have a duty to be nothing but the best."

"…I owe you, Dragus. Really. Thank you."

To be perfectly honest, I didn't think myself capable of leading a squad of knights. I had nothing but gratitude for how he acted as my proxy with them.

"No need to thank me," he said with a shake of his head. "This is *my* role, *my* duty. So long as you continue to fulfill yours, Commander Anisphia, this is more than enough honor for me."

"I appreciate you saying that."

"Besides, I'm excited beyond my years right now," he said, glancing at Garkie and Navre.

It was an intense glance, but the two remained at my side in stoic silence.

"I've been looking forward to this day—to seeing your new

magical sword in action," Dragus remarked.

"They're still prototypes. It will be some time before they're really finished," I pointed out.

Yes, the purpose of this outing was to serve as a field test for my newly designed magical swords.

Thanks to all the experience and know-how we had built up over the years, the swords' development had proceeded without delay.

At the same time, I had come up with the idea of conducting practical field tests, which would also help to address the monster movements Dragus was concerned about.

This would allow us to both confirm the magical swords' performance and thin out the local monster numbers. Two birds with one stone.

However, there was a third reason, as well.

"Garkie, Navre? Are you ready?" I called out to my two companions.

Garkie had been standing in silence and looking sterner than usual, and he was the first to speak up. "…I've got butterflies in my stomach," he said, as if wrestling with a headache.

"Is *that* why you're so glum?!" Navre said.

"You can't tell someone not to feel nervous!"

Navre rested a hand on his forehead and let out a long exhale. "How can you be like that, Gark? This is an important operation, both for the lab and for the order. Remember?"

"You're telling me you're *not* anxious?!"

"…Look, I understand how you feel, but you've got to keep it together. Right now, the other knights are busy driving the monsters this way so we can do our part."

"I know…"

Yes, the reason we had dispatched our knights into the forest wasn't to defeat any nearby monsters, but rather to drive them all toward us.

We had built two prototype swords, one each for Garkie and Navre, and instead of having them go out seeking monsters themselves, I figured it would be easier to just lure as many toward them as possible.

"I'm sure we'll be doing this sort of thing more often in the future to test other magical tools. Here's hoping it goes well!" I said softly.

“I’ll make sure it does,” Navre answered with a respectful bow.

With an almost inaudible groan, Garkie wriggled around and slapped himself loudly on the cheeks. Then, once he was ready to go, his attitude underwent a complete reversal. “Damn it, I’m making a fool of myself again. I’m fine now.”

“Don’t worry too much. I’m here if things don’t work out,” I said, hoping to reassure him.

“…That won’t do,” he answered with a weak smile before turning to face me directly.

“…I don’t want to be a burden anymore. And I don’t want you to ask me to stand back. I’m a knight in your service, Lady Anis. I want to hold my head up high.”

…*Ah.* I breathed a thin sigh.

Garkie was talking about the vampire encounter in Filwach Forest. I had asked them all to fall back. Believing I was the only one who could fight that foe, I wanted to protect everyone.

But from Garkie’s perspective, that order was an insult to his role and responsibilities.

“Gark isn’t just speaking for himself,” Navre added.

“Navre…?”

“You’re highly capable, Commander Anisphia, but no one can do everything on their own. That’s why we need to achieve concrete results today, so we can best serve you. Isn’t that right, Gark?”

“Yeah.”

The two of them exchanged casual grins.

They were asking me not to hold them back, to let them perform their duties as knights under my wing. I wondered whether I could fully appreciate the depth of resolve it must have taken to say that so directly.

I wasn’t sure—but not for a lack of confidence. If that was what they wanted, there was only one thing for me to do.

“Garkie, Navre. I’ll be watching from here. Show me what you’re capable of.”

“Yep. Keep your eyes peeled,” Garkie answered.

“We’ll live up to your expectations,” Navre added.

As if waiting for just that moment, a high-pitched whistle rang

out, signaling that the knights had succeeded in luring the monsters.

Neither Garkie nor Navre wasted a second before reaching for the swords sheathed at their waists.

Garkie drew his weapon, a longsword, slightly wider than usual, with a thick reddish blade. With the magicite crystal embedded in the handguard, the sword gave off an almost rugged appearance.

Navre's, on the other hand, was slender, its arc-shaped blade bluish green in hue. Like Garkie's, it had a magicite crystal embedded near the hilt.

Both weapons were a perfect match for their wielders.

The two adjusted their grips a few times and lowered into their battle stances, then turned to the forest.

"Think you're up to it, Gark?" Navre asked.

"Of course! I'm ready to go!" Garkie said.

"Then let's give this a shot."

"You got it!"

No sooner did they finish encouraging each other than a group of knights suddenly emerged from the forest, followed closely behind by a pack of monsters—gray wolves.

With their wide habitat and ability to breed rapidly, gray wolves ranked among the most common monsters encountered in the Kingdom of Palettia. Their hides were said to be so tough that only the best weapons could inflict serious damage.

The knights were running as fast as their feet could carry them, stopping occasionally only to slow the wolves with a quick feint.

Just as they reached us, laboring for breath, they called out.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"It's up to you now!"

With that, Dragus bellowed his signal: "Master Navre! Master Gark! Begin!"

"Right!" the two men shouted back.

Navre stepped forward, passing the knights who had lured the monsters our way.

Then, standing directly before the approaching pack of gray wolves, he swung his sword in a wide arc as if to cleave them all to one side.

"…Mow them down."

The next instant, the wind picked up around us—coalescing

into a blade that traced the path of his sword. It cut the wolves before they could get any closer.

With each step, he swung again and again, sending out one wind blade after another.

Navre struck a dazzling figure as he unleashed those airborne attacks, dropping the gray wolves one after the next, slicing them clean in half and sending limbs flying.

In the blink of an eye, he had finished off the gray wolves and moved on to his next prey. He didn't even pause to catch his breath.

"…The artificial magicite in the Vent suits you well, Navre."

The Vent was my first prototype magical sword based on an artificial magicite crystal, one used to activate an Air Cutter technique—and it suited Navre perfectly.

"It's an extremely simple spell… But it feels much better in the hand than a Mana Blade!" Navre called out, spinning around to cut down a gray wolf that tried to lash out from behind. It was like he had eyes in the back of his head.

There were two reasons we settled on an Air Cutter technique—because it was one of the simplest wind-type spells and because it provided a similar sensation to wielding a Mana Blade.

Navre had always been adept at wind magic, so the Vent was a natural fit in his hands. Ever since he'd gotten hold of the new sword, his movements had been impossibly sharp and precise.

Knowing him, he could probably perform fine with any weapon, but the Vent provided a vital supporting role, greatly bolstering his speed and spell activation time.

On top of that, since it was based on the design of the Mana Blade, the user could freely adjust the size and power of its attacks.

It was extremely useful, activated with a simple swing. Using it several times in rapid succession enabled keen long-range attacks.

Even those who lacked an aptitude for wind magic could still manipulate those Air Cutter blades, at least to some extent. Though of course, it was much more deadly in the hands of a user with a talent for wind spells.

In Navre's hands, as he cut down wave after wave of gray wolves, the results were as clear as day.

Since the blade itself unleashed its magical attacks, the user

could focus their own magic on reading their surroundings, better enabling them to counter and respond to any oncoming threats.

As a quick aside, I'd noticed Navre had taken a liking to the Vent ever since we had started testing it, taking care of it in his free time and asking me all sorts of questions about magical tools.

"Are you planning on hogging all of them, Navre?!" Garkie shouted.

"Hmph! Very well! They're coming from both sides, so I'll take the ones to the right!"

"I'll take the left, then!" Garkie replied, one step behind him.

The two split up, turning in opposite directions, while at the same time, more knights rushed back, pursued by hordes of monsters.

More gray wolves descended on Navre, while a killer bear looming as tall as two men stormed toward Garkie.

"Gark! I'm counting on you! Looks like we'll be eating bear hot pot tonight!"

"That thing's massive!"

"Damn it, someone help!" A vaguely familiar-looking knight dashed past Garkie at full speed, the bear close behind.

"Yes, yes. I'm on it." Switching places with the departing knight, Garkie confronted the creature, which lashed out with its fierce claws in an effort to brush him out of its way.

It was a blow that would have crushed any other fighter trying to take it head-on—yet Garkie promptly neutralized it, sending the bear's foreleg hurtling through the air before it suddenly burst into flames.

After the burning heap fell to the ground, the bear let out a piercing howl. It writhed in agony, which soon turned to fury, and the monster lunged forward with its remaining foreleg.

"…Not like that…," Garkie muttered under his breath, as if he'd forgotten the creature was there. "Like *this*. I can do it now, I think…"

In the blink of an eye, he swung his sword overhead, sending the bear's other foreleg flying. This time, the limb hit the ground without catching fire.

The scent of burning flesh tickled my nostrils. The first severed limb was well-cooked, like freshly grilled meat.

Garkie withdrew his sword, while the killer bear stood there stunned and enervated, as if unable to comprehend what had hit it.

The next moment, the monster's head slid away from its body, hitting the ground hard while its body collapsed behind it.

Garkie showed not a shred of concern as the impact of the creature's colossal body collapsing echoed all around.

"…Yep, that's the stuff." He nodded in satisfaction.

Before any of us could catch our breath, however, another band of knights dashed out from the forest.

"Whoa! There he is! Just a little further! Run! Everyone, get out of here!"

As the knights rushed past Garkie, the red blade clutched in his hands began to flicker, and its wielder took off toward a pack of gray wolves.

He swung his weapon in an arc at the leading wolf as it closed in on the knights' backs. He bathed the creature in flames and launched it away in two cleanly separated halves.

Seeing the head of the pack so easily defeated, the other wolves stopped in their tracks.

Garkie, however, took full advantage of that momentary lull to slip in and lay them all to waste.

The second he stopped moving, the gray wolves collapsed one by one, each exploding in a burst of flames.

Looking closely, I noticed that his weapon was glowing with a red-hot light, as if it had been pulled from a raging furnace. That must have been the source of the flickering I had caught sight of a moment ago.

Garkie's weapon was a prototype magical sword based on a natural magicite crystal, one designed exclusively for his own use.

"…That's the power of the Flamzell. Great work, Garkie."

A magical sword that could surround itself in roiling flame, built from the magicite crystal we had been entrusted with after meeting the demi-human in Filwach Forest.

The weapon was every bit as potent, as Garkie had just aptly demonstrated. Its unique ability was to burn through its targets, and while it was based on the lessons learned from the Mana Blade, its destructive potential was leagues ahead.

Given that the magicite crystal responded only to Garkie, Tomas had designed the sword's length and weight to be a perfect

match for him.

In short, the Flamzell more than made up for what Garkie lacked in attack power. To be perfectly frank, even I was afraid to cross blades with him now.

“Gark! Another monster will make contact in thirty seconds! It’s a big one!” Navre called out.

“Why do I have to take on all the huge ones?!” Garkie shot back.

“You’re the right man for the job! Everyone who’s returned, regroup! Get ready for the next wave!”

“You trying to hold my nose to the grindstone?!”

Thanks to the Vent, Navre’s senses were more finely attuned, and he had gained a broader awareness of his surroundings.

With the Flamzell, Garkie could annihilate any ordinary monsters in a single blow so long as he could get within range.

Seeing them up close, the effectiveness of those weapons was undeniable.

Navre moved to join up with the returning knights to prepare for the assault, while Garkie leaped forward, swiftly decapitating the unrelenting monsters with a flash of his blade.

The Flamzell continued to flicker like a live flame, but what stood out most amid the carnage was its hazy shimmer as it streaked toward the monsters.

“…You’ve gotten strong, huh?” I murmured under my breath as I watched Garkie and Navre dispatch one monster after the next.

I should have been happy. They were both doing well, and the magical swords I had designed were outperforming every expectation.

Yet I felt unsettled, a vague discomfort taking root in my chest, lingering along my spine. For some unknown reason, I wanted to join the knights in combat.

“You’re fretting, Commander Anisphia.”

“Oh, Lieutenant Commander Dragus.”

Dragus patted me lightly on the back as he fixed me with a confident grin.

He soon returned his gaze to the knights fighting up ahead, yet his gentle smile remained. There could be no mistaking the look of a man watching over his students in battle.

“…You’re very calm, Dragus,” I remarked.

“I’ve experience enough to match my years,” he answered.

“It’s no good. I can’t relax. I don’t know why—I just want to leap into the fray.”

“Are you worried? About our soldiers, perhaps?”

“…I really do have a bad feeling about this, you know?” I

muttered as if making excuses for myself.

I was a princess by birth, and now a commander of my own knightly order. It was common sense, I knew, for someone of such high status to steer clear of the front lines.

But for the longest time, no one had actually treated me like a princess. When I had slipped into the guise of an adventurer and leaped headfirst into their world, that new me had fit like a glove—and I still couldn't shake that feeling.

But if I charged ahead and plunged into battle myself, I would be depriving the others of their roles. They might even take it as an insult.

I knew I couldn't throw myself into the fray. I ought to have understood that. Still, it wasn't in my nature to simply watch on from the sidelines.

"Ha-ha-ha! Yes, you're still young, Commander!" Dragus chortled.

"…It isn't nice to laugh."

"Apologies. You just reminded me of myself when I was your age."

"…Did I now?"

"I had a rough time of it after losing Tiris."

I couldn't help but startle at that name.

Tiris—both Dragus's former lover and Lainie's mother—had long since passed away. She had entered the Kingdom of Palettia concealing her true identity as a vampire.

Considering how much Dragus doted on Lainie, there could be no doubting just how important Tiris had been to him.

"I went through a lot, really," he continued. "I went on missions alone, I pushed myself too hard, all because I didn't want to lose any more friends. In the end, they hated me for it. Ah, I was young back then."

"…And you're saying that's how I look to you?"

"I let my friends down by failing to acknowledge their aspirations, their convictions, their pride. I should have known better, but again and again, I disappointed them. That was my fault."

"…That hurts. So I've been letting everyone down?"

"Well, you haven't been raising them up, that's for sure," Dragus said lightheartedly.

I could feel my shoulders slumping.

I understood what he was saying. I always put magic and magical tools first, and I would hate it if someone took them away out of worry.

But even thinking that, I still couldn't dispel the urge to throw myself into the heat of the fray.

"It's human nature to feel attached to the things that matter to you. It's hard not to hold on, especially when you feel you're about to lose them," Dragus continued. "We know it's an obsession, but we can't stop ourselves. We want to hold it in our hands and protect it at all costs."

"…I understand."

"I think it's fine that way, Commander Anisphia. *You're* fine that way. You can be selfish every now and then."

"Huh?"

I was caught off guard, and I glanced up at Dragus's face. That wasn't what I'd expected.

He gave me a tender expression—one that called my father to mind, and that unsettled me.

"Be as selfish as you need, Commander. If anyone disapproves, if they want you to hold back, they can take it up with you themselves."

"…You're sure?"

"I know you're trying to change the world for the better. Some might not appreciate your ideals, but what you're trying to accomplish is important. Sometimes, it may overrule personal circumstances."

"But what if there isn't any great reason, you know? Maybe I'm just being selfish…"

"Even if you see them as insignificant, your position and talents will still give the illusion of greatness. So don't worry about needing to justify it with anything grand. That's just the way it is, Commander. The world you've shown is bright. That being said…" Dragus's gentle, understanding tone changed to something with more gravity. "You're no god. There's no need to save those who haven't prayed to you. Your desire to save others is one of your selfish wishes. And those who refuse them are human, too. There are no absolute answers. If what you want is universality, that's your ego. Never forget that."

"…Harsh words, Lieutenant Commander."

Those remarks cut deep. I had raised a hand to my forehead

without realizing it, covering my face.

My desire to see my dreams fully realized was my own vanity.

I was no god, just a human being, the same as those who rejected my dreams. We were on an equal footing.

Dragus was right. Of course he was. But it hurt to hear.

"You want to believe in the potential people have. That's why you can't bear to see things turn out poorly for them, why you feel the need to protect them. Because the future you're chasing after is good."

"Ugh, that stings…!"

"You're kind. And arrogant. And young."

"…But you still want to believe in me?"

"I do, and that's why you need to realize when you're being selfish—and that it isn't always such a bad thing."

"…But won't there still be people who resent me for it?"

"Of course. That's what happens whenever you're dealing with anyone, Commander. You have the power and authority to push through when you're being selfish. Your cause, and your justification for it, will always seem greater as a result."

"…So what should I do?"

"That's simple," Dragus said calmly, as if addressing a child. "You need to know when to depend on others. And you need to find people you can depend on."

"…That's easier said than done."

"I take it that's why you're so troubled right now?" Dragus joked.

My lips pursed in a pout. This would all be so much easier if I could bring myself to go along with his suggestion.

I knew I had to trust in those around me more. I did. But I didn't *want* to.

"Do you think it's selfish of me to wish for your safe return, Commander?" Dragus asked.

"…Is that what you want?"

"If I don't share my thoughts with you, you won't hear them, let alone respond. I've lost opportunities in the past, forever. And I'll regret that to the end of my days."

"…I understand. But aren't you afraid of rejection? You could end up losing everything in the end."

"That's *exactly* why you need to trust in others. Look at me—I'm a man who was easily deceived. Consider my life a lesson. Well,

Tiris wasn't there for me at the very end, but that's an important lesson, too."

"…That's no fair."

Really, I was at a complete loss. With my second-in-command coming out with such advice, I couldn't possibly ignore it.

"You're no good at relying on people?" he asked.

"…I know one person who spoils me rotten."

"You won't drown in it, not you. And if you do feel yourself slipping, there are people who will scoop you back up."

…I couldn't deny that, and it only made the sting worse.

I pursed my lips—when a scream suddenly stole my attention.

Spinning around to see what was happening, I laid eyes on a large troll slowly emerging from the depths of the forest, snapping trees with every step.

The knights cowered in alarm, while both Garkie and Navre leaped into action to face it head-on.

Blades of fire and wind struck the huge creature, but they inflicted only superficial wounds.

Roaring in fury, the troll swung its fist to strike back. Navre, however, quickly fell back a step, while Garkie dodged it by a hair's breadth.

The troll must have set its sights on Garkie, as it kept attacking relentlessly. Yet Garkie was no slouch, narrowly dodging its strikes.

All the same, he had no opportunities to counter. Finally, he shouted, "Sheesh! Hey, Navre! This one's *too* big, don't you think?!"

"We did suspect there might be magicite monsters nearby, but I wasn't expecting *this*!"

…This foe was by no means insurmountable for the two of them, but it would take them some time to subdue. If the knights managed to regroup, that would probably speed things up a little.

A levelheaded analysis of the situation would have led to the conclusion there was no need for me to intervene. And yet…

"…Lieutenant Commander?"

"What is it?"

"Today's objective was to collect data on the performance of the new magical swords. And the previous monsters were more than sufficient in that respect."

"Oh?"

"The odds are extremely low, but we wouldn't want the prototype magical swords to get damaged fighting the troll."

"…Meaning?" he asked with a teasing smile, urging me to continue.

He was doing this on purpose…

Pausing for a second to catch my breath, I declared, "This specimen may possess valuable materials, including a magicite crystal. I would prefer to finish it off with minimal damage."

"I see. You're saying you could dispatch it more cleanly?" Dragus asked as if suppressing a chuckle.

Then he cleared his throat, and his expression changed dramatically, taking me by surprise.

"Everyone, fall back! Commander Anisphia will finish it off!"

As soon as he barked those words the knights abandoned their attempts to encircle the troll and fell back.

Garkie and Navre, working in tandem to keep it at bay, likewise retreated.

Just as Dragus had urged me, I needed to secure these monster materials while inflicting as little damage as possible. In other words, I had to deal it a single, lethal strike.

"Aerial System: Dragon Heart!"

All at once, magical energy poured into my entire body from my dragon magicite, and from there, into the Celestial clutched in my hands. With that abundance of power, I sped for the troll.

Just enough power, for only as long as I needed it. There was no need to show off here. I simply had to finish this before anyone got hurt. That was all.

After first readying the Celestial, I unleashed a magical blade straight toward the troll's neck. If I couldn't score victory in one hit, there would have been no need for me to step in here.

"…Ah, I get it. If there's no reason for me to get involved, all I've got to do is create that reason."

I could push through with my own logic. I could use my power and authority to stitch together my own pretexts and pull in more power for myself—but that also came with responsibility.

What it took was determination—the determination to be every bit as selfish as you wanted. In the past, I had run away, but I was sure of myself now.

And with absolute confidence, I separated the troll's head from its shoulders.

The sunset dyed the sky red. On our way back from the forest, we set a bonfire in a clearing to hold a grand feast.

Sure, there was that incident with the troll toward the end, but we could safely say that the field test for Garkie's Flamzell and Navre's Vent had gone off without a hitch.

We had decided to celebrate with a meal, with drinks (though only one per person) and generous servings of the monster meat obtained from our efforts.

Fortunately, none of the knights had been seriously injured, so everyone could take part. We even called the carpenters and laborers working diligently to join us for drinks and song.

Though there was one figure sulking in the midst of all the festivities.

"Ah! If only that huge troll hadn't popped out at the end!"

"Garkie? Are you drunk?"

"I thought we were only allowed one drink each? How on earth have you gotten drunk?"

Garkie breathed a deep sigh as he gave his now-empty mug a shake.

The Flamzell had certainly proven its effectiveness, and our field tests had been a brilliant success—and yet Garkie seemed down. His inability to defeat the troll toward the end was weighing on him, or so I guessed.

"Ugh…"

"Shut up," Navre grumbled. "We're celebrating. Enough with the dramatic sighs."

"You're one to talk, Navre. You're frowning as much as ever."

"…Today was one of those days."

"*Every* day is one of those days."

"Shut up. Do you think you're the only disappointed one here? In the end, we forced Commander Anisphia to step in."

"Hmm?" I answered. "It wasn't like I thought you two were in any danger, you know? You could have easily beaten it. I just wanted to make sure the prototype swords didn't get damaged."

“I understand that, but we wanted to take them all down ourselves. Even the last one…,” Garkie muttered. His tone was too hollow to really say he meant that as a complaint.

Navre’s frown deepened, but he said nothing.

Hmm. I had expected this reaction, but unless I was missing something, they weren’t quite as unhappy as I had anticipated.

“Sorry. There will be plenty more chances to show off in the future. All right?”

“…Hah… You’re leagues ahead of us, Lady Anis,” Garkie said, moping.

He shifted his forlorn gaze to his empty mug, then up to the sky.

“You say that, but you were both incredible with those magical swords, you know?”

“Right. I’m happy with the results, as well. I’m sure a great many knights would be excited to use similar weapons,” Navre said, his wrinkled forehead relaxing somewhat.

As his expression softened, he finally looked his real age. That alone was enough to tell me what he thought of the Vent, and I couldn’t have been more pleased.

Garkie, on the other hand, remained silent, lost in thought—which wasn’t at all like him. I wondered what was going through his mind.

“Garkie?” I asked.

“Ah. It’s nothing. I mean, the Flamzell was a huge help and all. It’s just…”

“Just?”

“My mind’s all over the place. I can’t get my thoughts in order…” He groaned, letting go of his mug and holding his head in his hands.

While waiting for him to find his words, the rest of us sipped at the soup we had made together, savoring the flavors. This was the outdoors at its finest.

“I’m conflicted,” Garkie said at last, lowering his hands from his head. “Part of me is saying I’ve got to do my best, and the other half is wondering if I really have given it everything I’ve got. I’m not sure which is right…”

“Hmm… What were you hoping to achieve, exactly?” I asked.

“I wanted to really *master* the Flamzell. That sword is amazing, to the point I’m not even sure if I’m worthy of using it.”

"*I* sure wouldn't want to fight you with that firepower, Gark," Navre said with a sincere nod.

I could understand his trepidation. After all, one wrong move and Garkie could burn straight through you, weapon and all.

The only way to avoid the blade was to keep your distance, but if you tried a long-range attack, then you risked coming under the full brunt of the Flamzell's firepower.

"It's just… I feel like I'm only getting stronger thanks to these magical tools. Can I really say I'm doing *my* best?"

"What does that make me?" I asked. "Without my tools, I can't use magic at all."

"I—I know that… But *I* can, so it's hard to really accept the result. That thought keeps going round and round in my head."

"I understand the feeling," Navre joined in. "I wonder whether I relied too much on the Vent. It makes you doubt your own abilities."

"Right!" Garkie exclaimed. "*That's* what I'm trying to say! I knew you'd have a better way of putting it!"

"Hmm…," I began, when—

"Don't you consider a mastery of your tools to be a testament to your abilities?"

That voice—I couldn't believe my ears.

But I hadn't misheard.

Spinning around in panic, I laid eyes on a face I would never have expected to see today.

"Euphie?!"

"Good evening, Anis. How are you doing?"

"It's good to see you, Lady Anis."

"You too, Lainie?! What are you doing here?!"

"We're paying you a surreptitious visit," Euphie said with a smile, raising a finger to her lips like some kind of prankster.

Lainie, by her side, wore a reluctant smile.

A surprise clandestine visit?! She was queen! And she had sneaked off to this remote development project?!

I stared at her, while Garkie and Navre raced to get down on their knees.

"My deepest apologies, Your Majesty!" Navre stammered.

“Rest easy, Navre. I thought I said we were here unofficially.”

“B-but a *surreptitious* visit…?” I butted in. “After all the warnings you’ve given me? What about *your* escort?!”

“Here he comes now,” Euphie said lightly.

I glanced around, wondering who on earth she meant.

The second I spotted him, I almost shouted in shock. Wh-what was *he* doing here?!

“You mean Commander Sprout?!”

“Huh?!” Garkie exclaimed.

“Father?!” Navre startled, his head snapping up.

Behind Euphie stood the highest-ranking knight of the Royal Guard, his lips curled in a peaceful smile.

“Navre, Gark, I overheard you just now. Listen to Her Majesty. While it’s a mistake to assume your abilities have improved merely because of new tools, it’s just as much an error to trick yourselves into believing you can’t draw on them to improve your abilities. You should take that lesson to heart.”

“R-right… But, uh, what are you doing here?!”

“Protecting Her Majesty, of course. We heard that Princess Anisphia—or rather, *Commander* Anisphia—would be conducting field tests of her new magical swords. I was curious to hear how it went, so I volunteered to come.”

“B-but you’re the commander of the Royal Guard…!”

“And as head of the Royal Guard, I deemed this a necessary excursion,” he answered. “If you don’t mind, Commander Anisphia, might I borrow these two? I’d like to hear what it was like wielding those new magical swords.”

“S-sure… Go ahead…”

“Thank you. I hope our two knightly orders can continue to cooperate into the future. Until we speak again.” Commander Sprout laughed, tapping Navre and Garkie on the shoulder and leading them away.

Lainie, who had until now been watching on with wonder, offered Euphie a courteous bow.

“If you don’t mind, Lady Euphyllia, I’ll be off to see my father,” she said.

“Yes. Take your time,” Euphie answered.

“Thank you. Enjoy yourself, Lady Euphyllia.” Lainie giggled, walking away in a cheerful mood. She hadn’t seen her father, Lieutenant Commander Dragus, since our new city’s development

works got underway.

Hold on, this is no time for idle thoughts!

Should Euphie really be here?! Surely someone would notice she was gone! Especially if Commander Sprout was nowhere to be found, either!

My head was spinning—when I suddenly noticed that Euphie's companions had left.

…H-had they all run away?!

"Anis," Euphie called out, crossing her arms.

Ugh…! For whatever reason, her gaze felt even stronger than usual…!

"I'm sorry," she continued. "I just had to see you."

"Don't say that with a huge smile! You think this is perfectly fine, don't you?"

"I *did* want to hear the results of your test run with the new swords. This is all part of my official duties."

"You know that sounds like an outright lie…?"

"Heh-heh… Shall we take a walk?"

"…You're getting really demanding, you know, Your Majesty? I can't refuse a royal order, can I?" I joked.

The next thing I knew, Euphie had pulled me close. She could be so pushy when she was chasing after affection.

I started moving away from the circle of people gathered around the bonfire. It wasn't like I had anywhere in particular in mind, but with Euphie pulling on my arm, we ended up making our way to the top of the hill.

It wouldn't be long before the sunset gave way to night, the color of the sky painted over with dark.

I watched as the wind ruffled Euphie's hair when she stopped in her tracks, looking down on the work-in-progress townscape.

"It's coming along quickly," she said.

"You saw my reports, right? You'd be surprised what a difference using magic makes."

"The construction records for this settlement will be invaluable historical documents one day, I'm sure. I suspect it won't be long before people start describing this as a turning point in the history of the realm."

"…Even if it happens, that would still be a long way off."

"All the same, it's a future we'll see in our lifetimes. You and I will make it happen. Won't we?"

"…You're awfully confident today. You really wanted to see me so badly?"

"Actually, I was looking forward to coming here," Euphie said, playing with her hair.

I was taken aback by this gesture—at seeing the real Euphie, blushing in embarrassment.

I certainly wasn't prepared to see her behaving so innocently, and the shock was intense—my heart was pounding, and my breath caught in my throat. I couldn't take my eyes off her.

"…Anis?"

"Don't do anything cute. I might die here."

"Cute…? Why would that make you die…?"

"Your heart wouldn't skip a beat if I started teasing you all of a sudden?"

"…I'd love that. Why don't you try it sometime?"

"No way!"

Despite our playful banter, I couldn't deny how overjoyed I was to see her.

Laughing, we intertwined our arms and pulled each other close.

"…Actually, I was a little jealous," Euphie admitted.

"Jealous…?"

"You've been completely absorbed in this city, Anis, and so excited about your new magical swords. I understand, of course, but it's lonely when I'm not your highest priority…"

"Has someone been whispering weird advice in your ear? You've been making me feel awfully guilty lately. Just be honest with me."

"…You mean Tilty?"

"That shut-in?! I'm letting her have it next time I see her!"

"I'm kidding… Or am I?"

"What does *that* mean?!"

"If I just said outright how I was lonely without you, you would look at me like you didn't want to hear any of it. No?"

"…I suppose you have a point."

Tilty was definitely the sort of person to fill Euphie's mind with bad ideas, but I just couldn't imagine her broaching that sort of topic, so who exactly was behind all this?

While I was busy racking my brain, Euphie let out a throaty laugh. She was breaking character so often, I had no choice but to surrender.

"…Hah… Ugh…," I sighed.

"What's wrong?" Euphie asked.

"You're painfully, adorably cute. I wish we could do everything together…," I blurted out, grasping her in a hug and burying my face in her shoulder.

Euphie hugged me back, patting me softly. It was like she was promising to go easy on me.

I was just so happy to be with her, but at the same time, I knew she had to leave—and that filled me with unending sorrow.

She knew she really shouldn't be here, though, right? She had to… So why had she come?

"…Which brings me to my reason for this visit," she said out of the blue.

"Euphie?"

"This settlement will be the starting point for your most important dreams, Anis. It's an incredibly significant place for you. This project never would have happened if I weren't queen, but at the same time, it makes it difficult for us to stay at each other's sides, so I wanted to burn this sight into my memories—for my own sake."

Euphie's hand came to rest on my back as she caught me in a tight embrace.

We remained that way, hugging each other close, listening to the sound of our heartbeats, until we had both calmed down. Only then did Euphie release me.

"How is it? Watching your dreams take shape?" she asked.

"…I feel guilty about leaving you…but I *am* excited about it. Every day is a new adventure."

"I see. I'm glad to hear that…"

"But it can be a little painful at times…"

"Painful?" Euphie tilted her head to one side.

She didn't realize, it seemed, just how lonely I was.

Maybe *lonely* wasn't quite the right word, but all the same…

"Hmm… It's kind of hard to express in words."

"Yes, I see."

"…I want power. Authority."

"Excuse me?"

"Ngh… Maybe *power* isn't the right word…"

"Can you be more specific?"

"…I want the influence and achievements to get away with

being selfish." Little by little, my desires started coming into focus. "I want to realize my dreams. I know it might not be what's best for everyone, but I think they'll be so wonderful in the end. I want to keep going, to keep doing my absolute best."

"Yes, I understand."

"But I also feel like I ought to keep in mind that I *am* being selfish here. And that's why, if people think of me that way, I want enough leeway to be forgiven for it. I want so many things that I can't stand it. All these emotions are wrestling inside me—happiness and joy and loneliness…"

As I poured out my feelings to her, I suddenly remembered how I had been not too long ago—before Euphie entered into her spirit covenant to stake her claim for the throne, before she was adopted into the royal family. I had been hiding behind a mask so long that I had ended up deceiving myself. I'd buried all the emotions I couldn't bear to acknowledge, until nothing more would fit beneath that mask.

I had been marching forward on an undeviating path to achieve my dreams. Deep down, however, I understood instinctively that if I were to stop, I would be crushed. I realized now that my dogged pursuit was nothing more than a self-preservation mechanism.

I was still the same person I was then. If I stopped, I would likely crumble.

The difference was that it was joy and excitement that threatened to bury me now. I was fulfilled. I could see, with full confidence, that I was happy.

"…I want to hold on to this happiness forever. Every minute of every day is filled with joy," I murmured—but I knew just how impossible that would be.

Maintaining happiness was far from easy. Sometimes, you got caught up in currents beyond your control, and there was nothing you could do about it.

But all the same, I didn't want to let go of the happiness I had found. Which was why, every now and then, I was paralyzed with fear.

"…When you said 'power,' I didn't know what to think at first," Euphie said. "But that's such a *you* answer, Anis."

You're hopeless, she all but said as she leaned in to deliver a kiss on my forehead.

When her fingers brushed up against my cheek, I realized I was

crying.

"…Happiness can be a scary thing," she remarked softly.

"You think so, too?"

"Yes. Just being with you makes me so happy, but it also frightens me. Sometimes, I find myself imagining a world without you in it, and that makes me want to disappear."

"I'll never leave you behind, Euphie."

"I know that…but at the same time, neither of us can help worrying, can we?"

Our foreheads pressed up against each other's, our fingers and breath intermingling.

Nothing was eternal. That was the entire basis of my rejection of Lilana, and that was why we would both persevere to preserve things that we didn't want to change.

Our goals were important, and I had no intention of giving them up. However, there *were* times when I grew tired of putting in so much effort, even when I was having fun.

"…I think I understand now—wanting to end things while we're still happy…"

"…Yes."

"But I don't want to throw it all away."

"It's too early for this to all be over."

I looked into Euphie's eyes as we supported and encouraged each other, slowly drifting closer together. It was a gentle kiss, just a touch, but it was more than enough to fill my heart.

Even lost in this mire of uncertainty, I could still promise myself to give tomorrow my all. It was far simpler than it seemed. *We humans really are fickle creatures*, I thought.

"But I think it's good you're more aware of your own power and authority now, Anis," Euphie continued. "If it means you'll act more responsibly from now on, then I welcome it wholeheartedly."

"Ugh… I—I'll try to take that positively."

"I have news for you that might help with that."

"Huh?"

"About the name of this new city."

"The name…?"

Where did that come from? Though it was true that we hadn't yet decided on a name for it, at least as far as I knew…

I cocked my head in uncertainty. Euphie raised a finger to her lips and flashed me a brilliant smile.

“Authority comes with great accomplishments, wouldn’t you say? That’s why people leave behind the fruits of their labors, to serve as evidence of their deeds. Do you follow?”

“Y-yep.”

“And when this city is completed, it will be *your* greatest achievement, wouldn’t you say?”

“I—I suppose so…?”

“This city will serve as proof that you lived happily, that you were respected and admired by those around you. I hope everyone who knows of it will admire you as I do. Which is why I’ve settled on an easy-to-understand name. Now, it’s already been decided, so no arguing.”

“Seriously…?”

I knew what Euphie was trying to say, but at the same time, I didn’t have the faintest idea what it could be…

She was positively ebullient, and that was worrying. Lately, whenever she was in a good mood, I couldn’t shake the feeling that disaster was about to befall me… Or was I just imagining things?

“Which brings us to the name itself.”

“Yes?”

“It will be called Anisphia.”

“…Huh?”

“Anisphia—the city of magical science. That’s the name I would like to give to this settlement.”

…I finally grasped what she was trying to say.

My breath caught in my throat, and my body deflated. All sorts of emotions welled up in me, but the most prominent was embarrassment bordering on shame. I couldn’t say anything.

Huh? The city’s gonna have my *name?! I mean, I get what Euphie is saying, but really?! This is just…awkward!*

“…Any chance we can still change it?” I asked.

“And how exactly do you propose to persuade everyone? It’s already been approved by the kingdom’s most senior ministers,” Euphie said with a grin.

“You came prepared…!” I groaned, clenching my teeth.

I let out a deep sigh. My embarrassment had subsided considerably, but it wasn’t gone.

"…Right…" Then I whispered, "Anisphia—the city of magical science." Saying it aloud didn't make it feel more real. Maybe that was just because the city was still under construction?

"…I wonder what the view from up here will be like when it's finished," I murmured, staring out at the work-in-progress townscape.

"Are you excited?" Euphie asked.

"Definitely."

Having my name engraved in this settlement would certainly serve as proof of my existence.

More than ten years had passed since I first regained my memories of my past life, and during that time, I had been a downright nuisance to everyone around me. It was like I existed simply to bring disturbances into the world.

But maybe I could finally redeem myself here…? If that was what it meant for this city to have my name…then perhaps it *was* something I could be truly proud of.

All the same, it would no doubt take me a while to get used to the idea.

“I can’t wait to see it, Anis.”

“…Yeah.”

Standing side by side, we stared out at the yet-to-be-completed city, the stars twinkling beautifully overhead.

AFTERWORD

Hi there, Piero Karasu here. Thank you so much for picking up the seventh volume of *The Magical Revolution of the Reincarnated Princess and the Genius Young Lady*.

I'm deeply relieved and grateful to get this out to you all.

To be perfectly honest, I'm incredibly surprised that we've gone as far as seven volumes.

Speaking of surprises, this past year has been chock full of them. From the announcement of the anime adaptation, which then received such a positive reception, to a fanbook being released simultaneously with this seventh volume in Japan. It's enough to leave me, the author, genuinely shocked.

It's because of you, the fans, that I've been able to bring you the next chapter in this ongoing story. I owe you all my most heartfelt thanks.

I'll touch on the events of this latest volume in the following paragraphs, but I'll start by saying that it marks the beginning of a new arc in the overall narrative.

The magicology city first appeared in the web version of the story, but I've restructured the plot surrounding it to better suit the print editions.

Up until now, the story has mostly revolved around events at the detached palace. At long last, Anis has finally left those walls and set out for a new land, bringing with her new faces and triggering dramatic changes in the relationships between our cast of characters.

Those changes will affect not only Anis; they'll spill over to all those around her, too. This volume placed considerable emphasis on one such transformation in particular.

Through the experiences she's accumulated over the past few years of the narrative, I hope to demonstrate Anis's personal growth. In a sense, her move to this untamed land marks a major change in her life.

I hope to continue expanding the world of this narrative long into the future.

This volume centered around Anis leaving the royal capital and taking on her new position. For the next one, I'm hoping to focus more on Euphie.

As the narrative thus far has been centered around Anis's perspective, there are other untold stories I'd like to explore in greater detail. I hope you're as excited to read them as I am to write them!

With that, it's time for me to give my pen a break. I look forward to seeing you all again in the next volume.

Piero Karasu

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